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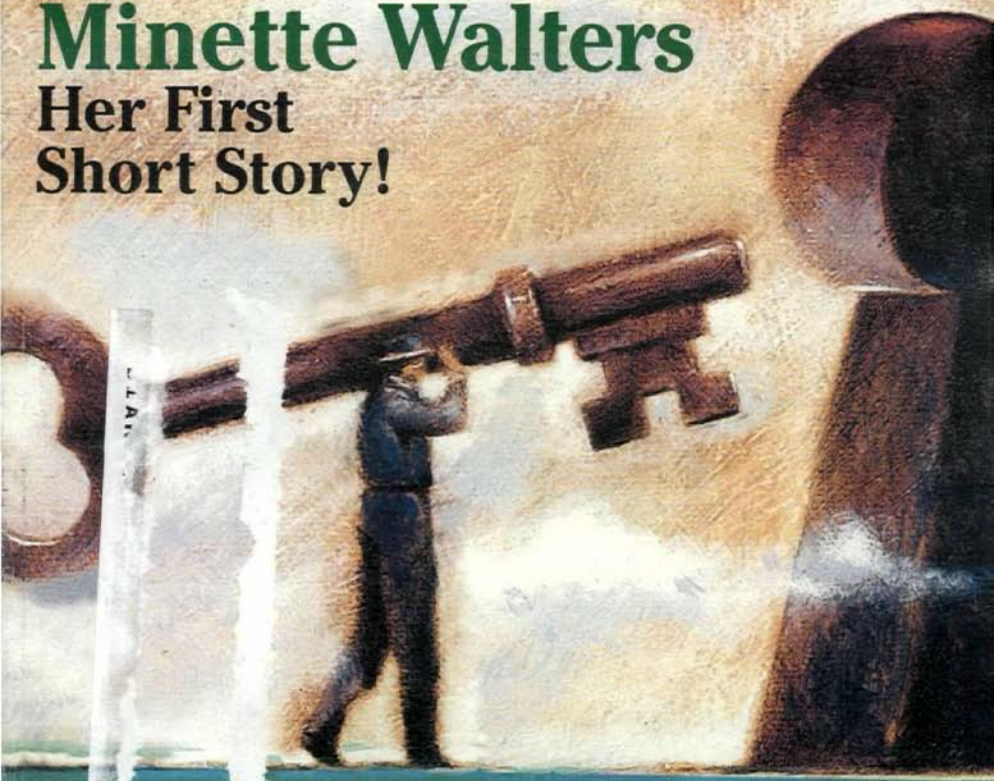

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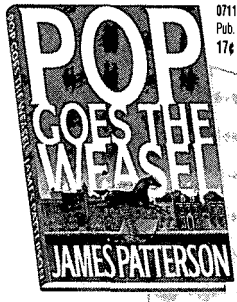

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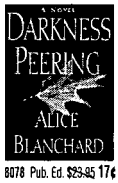

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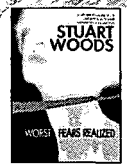

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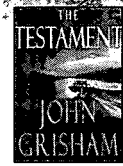

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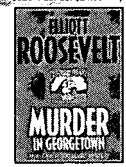

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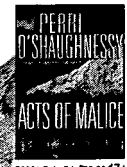

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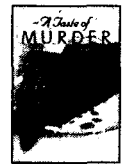

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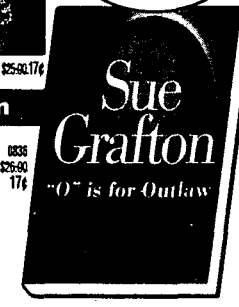

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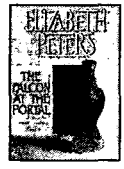

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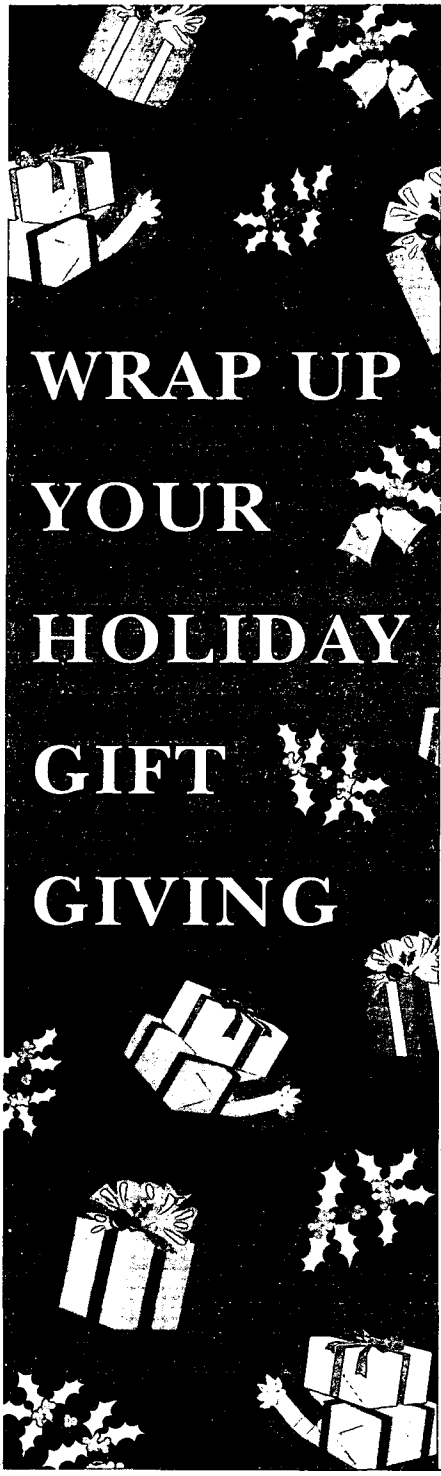

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Art by Mark Evans

IN FOR A PENNY

by Lawrence Block

Paul kept it very simple. That seemed to be the secret. You kept it simple, you drew firm lines and didn't cross them. You put one foot in front of the other, took it day by day, and let the days mount up.

The state didn't take an interest. They put you back on the street with a cheap suit and figured you'd be back inside before the pants got shiny. But other people cared. This one outfit, about two parts ex-cons to one part holy joes, had wised him up and helped him out. They'd found him a job and a place to live, and what more did he need?

The job wasn't much, frying eggs and flipping burgers in a diner at Twenty-third and Eighth. The room wasn't much, either, seven blocks south of the diner, four flights up from the street. It was small, and all you could see from its window was the back of another building. The furnishings were minimal—an iron bedstead, a beat-up dresser, a rickety chair—and the walls needed paint and the floor needed carpet. There was a sink in the room, a bathroom down the hall. No cooking, no pets, no overnight guests,

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the landlady told him. No kidding, he thought.

His shift was four to midnight, Monday through Friday. The first weekend he did nothing but go to the movies, and by Sunday night he was ready to climb the wall. Too much time to kill, too few ways to kill it that wouldn't get him in trouble. How many movies could you sit through? And a movie cost him two hours' pay, and if you spent the whole weekend dragging yourself from one movie house to another . . .

Weekends were dangerous, one of the ex-cons had told him. Weekends could put you back in the joint. There ought to be a law against weekends.

But he figured out a way around it. Walking home Tuesday night, after that first weekend of movie-going, he'd stopped at three diners on Seventh Avenue, nursing a cup of coffee and chatting with the guy behind the counter. The third time was the charm; he walked out of there with a weekend job. Saturday and Sunday, same hours, same wages, same work. And they'd pay him off the books, which made his weekend work tax-free.

Between what he was saving in taxes and what he wasn't spending on movies, he'd be a millionaire.

Well, maybe he'd never be a millionaire. Probably be dangerous to be a millionaire, a guy like him, with his ways, his habits. But he was earning an honest dollar, and he ate all he wanted on the job, seven days a week now, so it wasn't hard to put a few bucks aside. The weeks added up and so did the dollars, and the time came when he had enough cash socked away to buy himself a little television set. The cashier at his weekend job set it up and her boyfriend brought it over, so he figured it fell off a truck or walked out of somebody's apartment, but it got good reception and the price was right.

It was a lot easier to pass the time once he had the TV. He'd get up at ten or eleven in the morning, grab a shower in the bathroom down the hall, then pick up doughnuts and coffee at the corner deli. Then he'd watch a little TV until it was time to go to work.

After work he'd stop at the same deli for two bottles of cold beer

Multiple Edgar-award winner Lawrence Block is the author of several long-running mystery series. His popular character Bernie Rhodenbarr, burglar and bibliophile, stars in a new novel-length case published by E.P. Dutton. See *The Burglar in the Rye*. Readers who follow Mr. Block's stories about the hit man Keller will want to know that Jeff Bridges has signed to play the killer in the upcoming movie *Keller*.

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and some cigarettes. He'd settle in with the TV, a beer bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other and his eyes on the screen.

He didn't get cable, but he figured that was all to the good. He was better off staying away from some of the stuff they were allowed to show on cable TV. Just because you had cable didn't mean you had to watch it, but he knew himself, and if he had it right there in the house how could he keep himself from looking at it?

And that could get you started. Something as simple as late-night adult programming could put him on a train to the big house upstate. He'd been there. He didn't want to go back.

He would get through most of a pack of cigarettes by the time he turned off the light and went to bed. It was funny, during the day he hardly smoked at all, but back in his room at night he had a butt going just about all the time. If the smoking was heavy, well, the drinking was ultralight. He could make a bottle of Bud last an hour. More, even. The second bottle was always warm by the time he got to it, but he didn't mind, nor did he drink it any faster than he'd drunk the first one. What was the rush?

Two beers was enough. All it did was give him a little buzz, and when the second beer was gone he'd turn off the TV and sit at the window, smoking one cigarette after another, looking out at the city.

Then he'd go to bed. Then he'd get up and do it all over again.

The only problem was walking home.

And even that was no problem at first. He'd leave his rooming house around three in the afternoon. The diner was ten minutes away, and that left him time to eat before his shift started. Then he'd leave sometime between midnight and twelve-thirty—the guy who relieved him, a manic Albanian, had a habit of showing up ten to fifteen minutes late. Paul would retrace his earlier route, walking the seven blocks down Eighth Avenue to Sixteenth Street, with a stop at the deli for cigarettes and beer.

The Rose of Singapore was the problem.

The first time he walked past the place, he didn't even notice it. By day it was just another seedy bar, but at night the neon glowed and the jukebox music poured out the door, along with the smell of spilled drinks and stale beer and something more, something unnameable, something elusive.

"If you don't want to slip," they'd told him, "stay out of slippery places."

He quickened his pace and walked on by.

The next afternoon the Rose of Singapore didn't carry the same feeling of danger. Not that he'd risk crossing the threshold, not at

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any hour of the day or night. He wasn't stupid. But it didn't lure him and, consequently, it didn't make him uncomfortable.

Coming home was a different story.

He was thinking about it during his last hour on the job, and by the time he reached it he was walking all the way over at the edge of the sidewalk, as far from the building's entrance as he could get without stepping down into the street. He was like an acrophobe edging along a precipitous path, scared to look down, afraid of losing his balance and falling accidentally, afraid too of the impulse that might lead him to plunge purposefully into the void.

He kept walking, eyes forward, heart racing. Once he was past it he felt himself calming down, and he bought his two bottles of beer and his pack of cigarettes and went on home.

He'd get used to it, he told himself. It would get easier with time.

But, surprisingly enough, it didn't. Instead it got worse, but gradually, imperceptibly, and he learned to accommodate it. For one thing, he steered clear of the west side of Eighth Avenue, where the Rose of Singapore stood. Going to work and coming home, he kept to the opposite side of the street.

Even so, he found himself hugging the inner edge of the sidewalk, as if every inch closer to the street would put him that much closer to crossing it and being drawn mothlike into the tavern's neon flame. And, approaching the Rose of Singapore's block, he'd slow down or speed up his pace so that the traffic signal would allow him to cross the street as soon as he reached the corner. As if otherwise, stranded there, he might cross in the other direction instead, across Eighth Avenue and on into the Rose.

He knew it was ridiculous, but he couldn't change the way it felt. When it didn't get better, he found a way around it.

He took Seventh Avenue instead.

He did that on the weekends anyway because it was the shortest route. But during the week it added two long crosstown blocks to his pedestrian commute, four blocks a day, twenty blocks a week. That came to about three miles a week, maybe a hundred and fifty extra miles a year.

On good days he told himself he was lucky to be getting the exercise, that the extra blocks would help him stay in shape. On bad days he felt like an idiot, crippled by fear.

Then the Albanian got fired.

He was never clear on what happened. One waitress said the Albanian had popped off at the manager one time too many, and maybe that was what happened. All he knew was that one night his relief man was not the usual wild-eyed fellow with the droopy moustache but a stocky dude with a calculating air about him. His

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name was Dooley, and Paul made him at a glance as a man who'd done time. You could tell, but of course he didn't say anything, didn't drop any hints. And neither did Dooley.

But the night came when Dooley showed up, tied his apron, rolled up his sleeves, and said, "Give her my love, huh?" And, when Paul looked at him in puzzlement, he added, "Your girlfriend."

"Haven't got one," he said.

"You live on Eighth Avenue, right? That's what you told me. Eighth and Sixteenth, right? Yet every time you leave here you head over toward Seventh. Every single time."

"I like the exercise," he said.

"Exercise," Dooley said, and grinned. "Good word for it."

He let it go, but the next night Dooley made a similar comment. "I need to unwind when I come off work," Paul told him. "Sometimes I'll walk clear over to Sixth Avenue before I head downtown. Or even Fifth."

"That's nice," Dooley said. "Just do me a favor, will you? Ask her if she's got a sister."

"It's cold and it looks like rain," Paul said. "I'll be walking home on Eighth Avenue tonight, in case you're keeping track."

And when he left he did walk down Eighth Avenue—for one block. Then he cut over to Seventh and took what had become his usual route.

He began doing that all the time, and whenever he headed east on Twenty-second Street he found himself wondering why he'd let Dooley have such power over him. For that matter, how could he have let a seedy gin joint make him walk out of his way to the tune of a hundred and fifty miles a year?

He was supposed to be keeping it simple. Was this keeping it simple? Making up elaborate lies to explain the way he walked home? And walking extra blocks every night for fear that the devil would reach out and drag him into a neon-lit hell?

Then came a night when it rained, and he walked all the way home on Eighth Avenue.

It was always a problem when it rained. Going to work he could catch a bus, although it wasn't terribly convenient. But coming home he didn't have the option, because traffic was one-way the wrong way.

So he walked home on Eighth Avenue, and he didn't turn left at Twenty-second Street and didn't fall apart when he drew even with the Rose of Singapore. He breezed on by, bought his beer and cigarettes at the deli, and went home to watch television. But he turned the set off again after a few minutes and spent the hours until bedtime at the window, looking out at the rain, nursing the beers, smoking the cigarettes, and thinking long thoughts.

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The next two nights were clear and mild, but he chose Eighth Avenue anyway. He wasn't uneasy, not going to work, not coming home, either. Then came the weekend, and then on Monday he took Eighth again, and this time on the way home he found himself on the west side of the street, the same side as the bar.

The door was open. Music, strident and bluesy, poured through it, along with all the sounds and smells you'd expect.

He walked right on by.

You're over it, he thought. He went home and didn't even turn on the TV, just sat and smoked and sipped his two longneck bottles of Bud.

Same story Tuesday, same story Wednesday.

Thursday night, steps from the tavern's open door, he thought, *Why drag this out?*

He walked in, found a stool at the bar. "Double scotch," he told the barmaid. "Straight up, beer chaser."

He'd tossed off the shot and was working on the beer when a woman slid onto the stool beside him. She put a cigarette between bright red lips, and he scratched a match and lit it for her.

Their eyes met, and he felt something click.

She lived over on Ninth and Seventeenth, on the third floor of a brownstone across the street from the projects. She said her name was Tiffany, and maybe it was. Her apartment was three little rooms. They sat on the couch in the front room and he kissed her a few times and got a little dizzy from it. He excused himself and went to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror over the sink.

You could go home now, he told the mirror image. Tell her anything, like you got a headache, you got malaria, you're really a Catholic priest or gay or both. Anything. Doesn't matter what you say or if she believes you. You could go home.

He looked into his own eyes in the mirror and knew it wasn't true.

Because he was stuck, he was committed, he was down for it. Had been from the moment he walked into the bar. No, longer than that. From the first rainy night when he walked home on Eighth Avenue. Or maybe before, maybe ever since Dooley's insinuation had led him to change his route.

And maybe it went back further than that. Maybe he was locked in from the jump, from the day they opened the gates and put him on the street. Hell, from the day he was born, even.

"Paul?"

"Just a minute," he said.

And he slipped into the kitchen. In for a penny, in for a pound, he thought, and he started opening drawers, looking for the one where she kept the knives. ●

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The War That Never Was

by Edward D. Hoch

Introduced in the Cold War era, series character Jeffrey Rand entertained mystery fans for years with cases that cast him as a spy for Britain's Department of Concealed Communications. But Rand is long since retired, and only a couple of his friends remain in the department's old quarters, which are now part of the Ministry of Trade. Still, it is to them that Rand turns when he stumbles on an apparent international cover-up.

It was only because Rand missed his usual train home to Reading that he stopped in the Unicorn pub near London's Paddington Station for a quick half-pint. He paid no attention to the ruddy middle-aged man standing next to him, except to notice that he needed a shave. In fact, he had almost downed the ale, thinking about catching the next train, when the man tapped him on the shoulder. "Were you in the war, mate?"

"The Second World War?" Rand answered politely. "I was too young. I did my government service during the Cold War."

"I didn't mean those wars. I meant the war I was in."

Judging his age to be about forty-five, Rand asked, "Was that the Falklands or the Persian Gulf?"

The man shook his head, and Rand realized he'd had more than a few drinks. His breath surrounded them both in a haze of alcohol. "Neither one. I flew a fighter-bomber in the Ayers Rock War, back in 'ninety-three."

"The what?"

The man seemed to realize he'd said too much. He shook his head vigorously. "Top secret. Not supposed to talk about it."

"Ayers Rock is in Australia, isn't it? There was never a war down there."

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The man had a sly look on his face. He glanced around and dropped his voice almost to a whisper. "They kept it hushed up. Buy me a pint and I'll tell you about it."

Rand glanced at his watch. He had a half-hour before the next train to Reading. This seemed as good a way to spend it as any, and he'd have a funny story for Leila over dinner. "Sure," he responded. "Let's get a booth where we can chat. I've got a little time before my train."

They carried their glasses over to a table still damp from the most recent customers, and Rand noticed the man walked with a decided limp. Close up, facing him across the table, Rand was aware of his scarred, battle-weary face. "Name's Chat Wallis. What's yours?"

Rand dismissed the question with a casual, "Jeff. What sort of name is Chat?"

"Short for Chatterton. Family name, all very old school. They thought I'd be prime minister one day. Instead I ended up a mercenary, available to the highest bidder."

"Tell me about the Ayers Rock War," Rand urged. "When was it?"

"Six years ago," he replied at once. "The summer of 'ninety-three. God, it was hot that July. I remember the sweat pouring off me even before I took off. We were flying six Russian jets from the Afghanistan days, with rocket launchers and napalm bombs under the wings."

"What was your target?"

"Well, it wasn't the sheep, I'll tell you that."

"The sheep?"

"Lots of sheep in Australia, so many that they use helicopters to herd them. That was part of the problem, you see."

Rand shook his head. "I believe you'd better start at the beginning. Exactly whom were you fighting against? Australia?"

He leaned forward, lowering his voice still further. " 'Course not! We were fighting with the Australians, not against them. It was the Aborigines' revolt that started it, over a hundred thousand of them crying for blood. They overran Alice Springs and some of the other interior towns, established their headquarters on Ayers Rock, a sandstone monolith in almost the exact center of the country. It was a sacred place to the Aborigines. They called it Uluru. The Australians fought them as best they could, but in the end they needed our help."

"Against unarmed natives?"

"Don't fool yourself, man! A lot of the native people had taken jobs, learned skills. Several were sheepherders who learned to fly helicopters. The Australian planes would fly in, looking for revolu-

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tionaries, when suddenly a swarm of copters would rise straight up in their path, firing heat-seeking missiles."

Rand merely shook his head. "Funny I never read anything about all this. Six years ago, you say? How long did it last?"

"Fifty hours after we got there. Some people called it the Fifty Hours War, but in all the top-secret dispatches it was the Ayers Rock War."

"Television and the press simply ignored all this?"

"You don't go to the papers and TV to find out what's really happening in the world, mate. Things go on that you'd never dream of. Once in a while the public gets wind of it, but rarely. They say a newspaper publisher who found out about Ayers Rock got pushed off his yacht in the Mediterranean, and no paper would touch it after that."

What struck Rand more than anything else about Chat Wallis was that the man didn't seem crazy or delusional. His eyes lacked the wild look of an unhinged mind. "You're not talking about a political scandal or a sex romp here," he told Wallis. "You're talking about war. There must have been hundreds killed."

"They told us there were over thirteen hundred Aborigine casualties. We lost forty-four men. By any yardstick it was a successful mission."

"And you flew a Russian fighter plane?"

"Fighter-bomber, war surplus. We carried no markings. The British weren't supposed to be involved. We only came to the aid of the Australians when they needed us to put a quick finish to the thing."

"But you were an RAF officer?"

A shake of the head. "Paid mercenaries, all of us. I earned flight pay of seven thousand American dollars a month. We'd fought in Africa for various nations. But we were trained by our officers, and flew our own planes, usually surplus Soviet MiG-23 fighter-bombers. Some countries were willing to pay a million dollars a month or more for our services."

"Where did Third World nations get that sort of money?"

"Usually it was financed by the International Monetary Fund. They wanted to prevent a long, protracted war that would damage a nation's trade and economy."

"Tell me more about Ayers Rock."

"We attacked out of the east just at dawn, when they'd be blinded by the sun at our backs. I remember seeing them clambering like ants up the face of that great rock as it glowed orange in the rising sun. They tried to hide in its crannies but we swept over in waves, strafing them first and then dropping napalm to burn them out of their holes."

Rand could hear no more of this obscene dream. "I have to catch

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my train now," he decided suddenly, glancing at his watch for confirmation. "Been nice talking to you."

"Come back tomorrow," Chat Wallis urged. "I'll tell you some more."

That evening over dinner he told Leila about the man in the pub. "You should stay out of bars," she advised. "Or out of London."

Involved as she was with her lecturing duties at Reading University, Leila rarely ventured into the city, except to join Rand at some exceptional play or concert they both wanted to attend. She took a dim view of Rand's occasional visits to his London club or to a few old friends. "You get into trouble every time you go there," she'd told him once following the business at the old-spies' club.

"I'm not in any trouble," Rand assured her. "I had a drink with him in a pub and I'll probably never see him again."

"The Ayers Rock War!" she said with a snort. "Who ever heard of such a thing? Are you telling me the Australians or British or anyone else could mount a major air attack against their own people without the world's press knowing anything about it? That a racial war with over thirteen hundred casualties could pass unnoticed in the nineteen nineties?"

"The middle of Australia is a pretty arid place with very few people. How many would there be out at Ayers Rock?"

"Plenty, Jeffrey. Did you ever hear of tourists? They come to Ayers Rock by the busload. And often a number of Australians are camped out there by the rock. There's always someone around. It's a national landmark. The man is just plain crazy. You find them everywhere these days, especially in London." She allowed herself a smile. "I think it has to do with the millennium."

He chuckled along with her and switched to another subject.

But in the morning he found himself still thinking about Chat Wallis, a veteran of the war that never was.

Rand didn't tell Leila that he was off to London again. He simply boarded the morning train, leaving her a note saying he might be a bit late getting back. There was no real reason to anticipate another meeting with Wallis, but he had a feeling the man would be true to his word and reappear as promised. Rand was seated in the same booth by one o'clock, having a sandwich and a pint, but the Ayers Rock veteran was nowhere in sight.

Thirty-five minutes later the man appeared in the doorway, still needing a shave. He paused until his eyes became accustomed to the dim light of the pub. Then, as if he'd known all along that Rand would be there, he limped over to his table. "Hello again, mate. Good to see you."

"I've been thinking about what you told me yesterday."

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Wallis glanced down at Rand's half-empty glass. "Can't talk with a dry mouth."

"Of course not." Rand signaled to the barmaid, a pert young lady with short brown hair. "You know, there's something about your story that doesn't make sense. Why should you tell it to me rather than one of the tabloids that might pay you for it?"

"I talked to a reporter once. He thought it might make a better story if I could work an alien kidnapping into it. Spaceship landing on the Rock and all."

"Maybe he was right."

Chat Wallis shrugged. "I told him I was willing to take a lie-detector test, but he wasn't that interested."

"Wait a minute. Are you saying you'd take a lie-detector test to prove you fought in this Ayers Rock War?"

"I certainly would! Hell, it's my life!"

It was a crazy idea, but Rand had to get to the bottom of this. "Look, I know a woman who gives lie-detector tests in the private sector, to new employees hired for sensitive positions. If I set it up and paid for it, would you be willing to take it?"

The man squinted at him. "You don't believe me, do you? Nobody ever does."

"Her name is Sophie Gold. Let me give her a call."

Rand went over to the pay phone on the wall and looked up Sophie's number in his address book. He'd known her briefly at Concealed Communications before he retired and the department was shut down. In the years since then, he'd talked to her on the phone and had lunch with her occasionally when he was in London. He recognized her voice at once when she answered. "Gold Technologies, Sophie Gold speaking."

"Sophie, this is Rand. How have you been?"

"Can't complain. Are you in town?"

"Just for a few hours. Still in the lie-detector business?"

"More than ever. I'm buying a second machine and hiring an assistant to operate it."

"I have someone I'd like to bring over. I don't suppose you have any time this afternoon."

"Is it urgent?"

"Not really, but I'd like to do it before he changes his mind."

"Let me check my appointment book. I may have an opening." She came back on in a moment. "Is four-thirty too late for you?"

"How long does it take?"

"Usually close to an hour by the time I get things set up and ask the subject some test questions first."

"Write me in for four-thirty, Sophie. If he can't make it then, I'll call you right back."

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Rand went back to the table. "We can do it between four-thirty and five-thirty today if that's good for you."

"Sure, why not? It'll be good to have someone believing me after all these years."

They had over two hours to kill, and Rand wasn't about to spend them at the pub. "I have some people to see," he told Wallis. "Can you meet me at this address at four-thirty? It's on Charing Cross Road, just up the street from the National Portrait Gallery."

"I'll find it," he promised. "Four-thirty."

Knowing it might be the last he ever saw of the man, Rand left the pub and hailed a taxi to the nondescript government building overlooking the Thames which had once housed the Department of Concealed Communications. The old crowd was scattered now—dead, retired, or transferred to a world where messages were encoded by microchips and decoded the same way. He remembered the rooms full of young women at rows of desks, toiling to break the latest enemy cipher, because women were better at it than men. It was all gone now, and the building was part of the Ministry of Trade, but he still had one or two old friends left there.

His visit had to be cleared by a receptionist in the main lobby, but otherwise there was none of the tight security from earlier days. The workers here dealt with trade balances rather than codes and ciphers. Brent Foxwell, barely hanging on until retirement, was one of those.

"Well, Rand," he said, getting up from behind his crowded desk. "It's good to see you again."

"Always a pleasure, Brent. I had an hour or so to kill and there's no better way to do it than with old friends."

"How's Leila?" He was younger than Rand, but balding and squinty, beginning to show his age.

"Very good. Still lecturing in archaeology at Reading, of course. Sometimes I think she married me because I looked like a bag of old bones."

They chatted on for about ten minutes, casually reliving the old days, before Rand managed to steer the conversation into the desired channel. "It must be boring working with imports and exports all day, nothing like old times."

"Boring is just what *I* need," Foxwell said, lighting his familiar pipe.

"Do you handle Commonwealth countries too, like Australia?"

"Certainly. It's all trade."

"I've heard there was quite a disruption during the uprising back in 'ninety-three."

Foxwell wrinkled his brow. "Uprising? What was that?"

"Something about the Aborigines as I remember it."

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He shook his head with a smile. "There was never anything like that. You probably dreamed it one night after watching *Zulu* on the telly."

"No doubt," Rand agreed. "But I thought I heard it from a fellow named Wallis."

"Chatterton Wallis? The fellow with the limp? The man is off his rocker. Battle wounds, I suppose. Should be locked away."

"You've had contact with him?"

"Not in years. I'm surprised he's still around."

After another twenty minutes of aimless banter, Rand took his leave, pausing only to look out the window at the river. "It was always a great view," he told Foxwell.

Once outside, he crossed Westminster Bridge and headed up Whitehall to Trafalgar Square, then past St. Martin-in-the-Field, where a craft sale was in progress. At the start of Charing Cross Road he found Sophie Gold's building and was surprised to see Chat Wallis waiting for him, though it was not yet four-thirty.

"I came early," the man told him. "Something you learn in the military."

"Fine. Let's go up."

Sophie Gold had been short and slender when Rand worked with her, an auburn-haired bundle of energy. She'd broadened out somewhat over the years, but still retained the momentum he remembered from the old days. She greeted him with a professional handshake and a sideways glance at Wallis. "Is this my subject?"

"Sophie Gold, let me introduce Chat Wallis. He's been telling me an interesting but unbelievable story, and he's willing to take a lie-detector test to convince me it's true." Rand ran quickly through the highlights of Wallis's tale, and the man contributed a few personal facts so she could develop the questions to ask him. Then Wallis waited in the anteroom while they wrote out a list of things to ask.

It was five o'clock by the time he was seated in the chair by the machine, entangled in wires like a spider's hapless victim. "Go ahead," Wallis urged. "Let's get this over with."

"Very well." Sophie fiddled with the dials and started down the list of questions while Rand sat on the sidelines, behind Wallis.

"Is your name Chatterton Wallis?"

"It is."

"Were you born in Liverpool on April twenty-fifth, nineteen fifty-two?"

"I was."

"Have you ever been to Russia?"

"No."

"Have you ever been to Australia?"

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"Yes."

"Have you ever been a mercenary in the pay of a foreign government?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever killed a man?"

"Yes."

"Were you ever in the Royal Navy?"

"No."

"Have you been to Africa?"

"Yes."

"As a mercenary?"

"Yes."

"Were you in Australia in July of nineteen ninety-three?"

"Yes."

"As a mercenary?"

"Yes."

"Were you fighting the Australian army?"

"No."

"Were you fighting Australian Aborigines?"

"Yes."

The questions droned on, covering Ayers Rock and the early morning assaults, touching on the number of people killed, on his training and pay, on the unmarked planes. At the end of a half-hour Sophie Gold was still asking questions. It was almost six before they finished. She spent a few silent moments checking the graphs and marking certain answers, then came out to Rand with the results.

"As you know, the lie detector is not a foolproof device. That's why the results have no standing in a court of law. However, based upon what we see here, I have to tell you this man is speaking the truth."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Does it make your job more difficult?"

"There is no job," he said, writing a check for her service. "Just a man in a pub with a story. And I had to listen to him. Anyway, thanks for your help, Sophie."

"Any time."

Rand walked downstairs with Chat Wallis. "Did I pass?" the ruddy-faced man asked.

"You know you did."

"Then maybe I can ask the government for a medal."

"I wouldn't advise that." Rand had a sudden thought. "Tell me something. What about the men you fought with, the other pilots? What happened to them?"

"When you're a mercenary you go where the money is. Some of them went back to Africa, a few died there."

"Are you in contact with any of them?"

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"Not really. The company didn't want me back after I started talking about Ayers Rock. There's a man here in London I see occasionally, though. Rex Ryan. He retired from the game after a back injury."

"Are his memories of Ayers Rock the same as yours?"

Wallis shrugged. "You'd have to ask him. He didn't talk much about it."

"What's his address?"

"Don't know. I just see him at the club once in a while."

"What club is that?"

"Soldiers of Fortune, Limited. It's the company that employed us. They have a place on Pembridge Road."

They'd strolled back down to Trafalgar Square and were cutting a path through the pigeons when a short man with bulging eyes appeared directly in front of them, passing out handbills. "Take one, mate. Best show in town," he said as he forced the paper into Chat Wallis's hand.

Wallis glanced at the ad for a Soho strip club, crumpled it, and threw it away.

"Those places are all alike."

Rand noticed a drop of blood on the tip of his thumb. "Did you cut yourself?"

"Probably a paper cut," Wallis said, barely noticing it.

"I want to see you again. How can I contact you?"

Wallis hesitated and then answered, "Celeste, the barmaid at the Unicorn. We're buddies. If I'm not there, she'll give me a message."

They parted near Charing Cross and Rand took a taxi to Paddington Station. Chat Wallis had given him a great deal to think about. Had the man been living in an alternate universe, or was there really a massive cover-up under way? Neither explanation seemed possible, and Rand was beginning to regret he'd ever stopped in the Unicorn for that ale.

It was Leila who called his attention to the small item in the *Times* the following morning. "That man you met in the pub—didn't you say his name was Chatterton something?"

"Chatterton Wallis. Why?"

"He died. Collapsed on the Strand early last evening, apparently of a heart attack."

Rand took the paper from her and read the brief story. Wallis was not further identified. Though no time was given, the location on the Strand made it likely he'd died within minutes after Rand left him. That was when he remembered the drop of blood on Wallis's thumb, and the little man with the handbills. "My God, Leila! They've killed him!"

"What are you saying?"

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"A crowded street, a poisoned needle, that's all it takes."

"Why would they kill a man for telling a crazy story like that?"

"Perhaps because the story wasn't all that crazy. Perhaps because I had him take a lie-detector test and he passed it."

Leila reached over to take his hand. "Promise me you'll stay out of it, Jeffrey. Whatever happened, you can't help him now. If the government's involved—"

"They had him killed, Leila. They were afraid because he was talking to me."

"You're not sure of that."

"I have to find out. Wallis mentioned two people, another mercenary named Rex Ryan and a barmaid at the Unicorn named Celeste. They might be able to tell me something. I have to go back this morning."

"On a Saturday?"

"The people behind this don't keep regular office hours."

"Be careful," was all she could say.

Rand caught the train into London for the third straight morning. This time he went directly to the Unicorn pub, though it was barely open at a few minutes after eleven. The barmaid with the short brown hair was polishing glasses and he wondered if she was Celeste.

"I'll be right with you," she told him.

"I don't want a drink. Are you Celeste?"

She stopped polishing and turned toward him. "You're the bloke who was in here with Chat yesterday."

"I read about what happened."

She nodded. "He had a lot of things wrong with him but I never knew his heart was one of them."

"He told some pretty wild stories," Rand ventured.

"That he did."

"I believe I left him yesterday shortly before his fatal heart attack. He told me if I ever needed to reach him I should come to you. He said the two of you were buddies."

Her large violet eyes clouded over. She shook her head, close to tears. "I can't reach him now."

"I know that, but I have to find out more about him. I don't even know where he lived."

"Sometimes with me," she admitted. "When he wasn't away somewhere or just bumming around the city."

"Did he ever talk about Australia?"

"He told that story to everyone who would listen. Fire-bombing Aborigines on Ayers Rock! Who would believe that?"

"I would," Rand admitted. "Or at least, I believed that he believed it." He decided he had to be frank with her. "Look, Celeste, I think Chat might have been killed by someone because

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he was talking too much about the Ayers Rock War."

"Killed? The paper said it was a heart attack."

"I've made a study of counterintelligence work. There are certain drugs that can mimic a heart attack quite effectively. They've been used before."

She shook her head, unwilling to accept what he was saying. "Don't tell me that. I don't want to hear any more."

Rand sighed. "I'm not trying to upset you. I'm only trying to get at the truth. Did Chat ever mention a fellow mercenary named Rex Ryan?"

"Rex, sure! They were good friends. God, I wonder if he knows about it?"

"Could you tell me where he lives?"

She shook her head. "He came in here with Chat a few times, but that's all I saw of him."

"Chat told me yesterday that I could contact him through the organization Soldiers of Fortune, Limited."

"Yes, I suppose so. I stayed away from that sort of thing. I hated even hearing about what they did, waging someone else's war for money."

Other customers were coming in, and their conversation ended with his promise to tell her if he learned anything. Rand left the Unicorn and took a taxi to the address of Soldiers of Fortune, Limited. He'd half expected an efficient modern office with a wall map showing all the countries in which these men had fought. Instead he found more of a clubhouse, with television sets and rooms for card-playing and billiards. There were only a few men in the place during the noon hour, and all were younger than Rand by a decade or more.

"You a member here?" one of them asked. "It's a private club."

"I'm looking for Rex Ryan."

"Not here. Haven't seen him in weeks."

"It's important. It's about Chat Wallis."

"Don't know as I can help you, mate. Rex is probably out of the country."

Rand took out a card with his home phone number on it. "If he turns up, could you ask him to give me a call? Tell him it's most important."

"Right you are!" He stuffed the card into his pants pocket and Rand left the clubhouse doubting if Rex Ryan would ever see it.

There were no cabs in front of the place and he started walking north toward Portobello Road. He hailed a passing taxi and was just getting in when a man shoved him on the shoulder and got in after him. Rand opened his mouth to protest and the man held a finger to his lips. "I'm Ryan," he said quietly. "Why do you want to see me?"

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"You were at the clubhouse?"

"Where to?" the cabby interrupted to ask.

"We'll get out at the next corner," Rand decided suddenly. He didn't want the driver to overhear their conversation. But he'd forgotten it was Saturday and they found themselves on Portobello Road, in a sea of shoppers seeking out antiques and second-hand goods of every description at the weekly street market.

Ryan, a scrubby man with a gradually graying brush cut, asked, "Is this your idea of a private conversation?"

Rand smiled ruefully. "Sometimes a crowd is the safest place. Why didn't you show your face at the club?"

"These days I like to stay undercover."

"You heard what happened to Wallis?"

"Yes."

"I think he was killed."

"So do I."

"By whom?" Rand asked.

"The operations people. They can't let the truth get out."

"About the Ayers Rock War?"

Ryan nodded. "That's it."

"But there was no Ayers Rock War!"

"For some people there was."

"Where, in an alternate universe?"

"Stop asking questions, or you'll be next. He talked to you. Last year he was sounding off at the Unicorn and then got struck by a car on the way home. Hit and run. It left him with that limp. I think it was meant as a warning for him to shut up, but he didn't take it."

"His girlfriend Celeste says he talked to people."

"But you're the first one who believed him."

"No," Rand corrected. "I believed that *he* believed. But how could he have fought in a war that never took place?"

Rex Ryan closed his eyes for an instant. Then he said, "I fought in the same war."

"Tell me about it."

The crowd was pressing in on all sides. Families with children fought their way to the stalls alongside teenage girls with green hair and nose rings. Rand and Ryan threaded their way along as best they could, but conversation was impossible.

Finally they took shelter in a doorway and Rex Ryan began his story. "I never would have told this except for what happened to Chat. He was a good buddy and he didn't deserve to end up like that."

"Tell me."

He sighed and started to talk, and all the time they stood in the doorway watching the people of all races and colors mingling at the Portobello Market, as they did every Saturday. "We'd been

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fighting in Africa, flying for one of those newly independent nations struggling to survive. Then the contract ran out and Soldiers of Fortune summoned us back to London. It was the summer of 'ninety-three . . ."

After they parted, Rand put in a phone call to Brent Foxwell at the Ministry of Trade. He wasn't there on a Saturday afternoon, but at Rand's insistence the operator patched him in to Foxwell's home number.

"What is it, Rand?" Foxwell asked when he came on the phone, sounding irritated. "They're only supposed to put emergency calls through on a weekend."

"This is an emergency. I've just spoken to Rex Ryan and he told me the whole story."

Foxwell might have cursed softly. "Where are you now?"

"Portobello Road. Can you meet me here?"

"Give me an address and I'll be there."

The crowd had thinned out only slightly by the time Brent Foxwell arrived. He'd parked on the next street and walked the rest of the way, pushing through the strollers and shoppers until he caught sight of Rand. His face was flushed with anger as he approached. "Who gave you authority to meddle in government business?" he asked as soon as he determined there were no eavesdroppers nearby.

Rand allowed himself a slight smile. "I didn't know the training of private mercenaries was part of government business."

"Is that what Ryan told you? He's as crazy as Chat Wallis!"

"Wallis certainly had mental problems, but their root cause was the training your people subjected him to. I knew from my first conversation with Wallis that there was no Ayers Rock War. He described how hot it was in Australia in July of 'ninety-three. But it's winter in Australia then. Even in those arid areas, the temperature would have been barely above sixty Fahrenheit. Wherever that war was fought, it wasn't in Australia in July."

"None of this involves me," Brent Foxwell said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. "I'm in trade, remember?"

"You mentioned Wallis's limp but told me you hadn't seen him in years. Ryan says the limp was from a hit-and-run driver just last year. You knew about it, perhaps because you caused it to happen."

Foxwell snorted. "You always were one for rash judgments, Rand."

"This isn't a judgment, this is fact. Rex Ryan told me all about it. Trade with the emerging African nations was important to our country, and you wanted to bring stability to the stronger nations by facilitating the training of the mercenaries they hired to fight their wars."

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"Perhaps I did," Foxwell admitted. "Was that so wrong? The mercenaries' contract fees are often financed by the International Monetary Fund, which supports these actions. We used standard training techniques."

"Some of them weren't so standard. According to Ryan, the mercenary pilots wore special headsets and hand controls for virtual-reality scenarios. They seemed to be piloting their fighter-bombers through a three-dimensional environment generated by computer software. It was very real to the senses, too real for someone like Chat Wallis. He came out of the training convinced that he'd fought rebelling Aborigines at Ayers Rock. Of course, Soldiers of Fortune ceased to employ him, but he couldn't be stopped from talking about it. Not unless he died."

They walked on through the crowded street, hearing the occasional shouts of vendors. "These things happen with any sort of training," Foxwell argued. "It was something of a tragedy for Wallis, but there was nothing we could do. If someone started believing him, you can imagine what the press would have done with the story. The racial angle alone—" He shook his head sadly. "Believe me, what happened to Chat Wallis yesterday was the only possible solution."

"But why did you use Australian Aborigines in your virtual reality scenario?"

The balding man turned to him. "Don't you understand? The mercenaries were killing blacks in those African nations! We needed to perfect their training with a similar enemy. We couldn't use a specific African nation, so we invented an Australian revolt by the Aborigines."

That was when Rand saw the short man with the bulging eyes approaching them through the crowd of Saturday bargain-hunters. The only possible solution for Chat Wallis, and for himself.

"Take one, mate," the man urged, extending a handbill while echoing the words he'd spoken in Trafalgar Square. "Best bargain on Portobello Road!"

Rand had only an instant to yank Brent Foxwell off balance, pushing him into the outstretched hand of the little man. Foxwell gasped softly, though the pain could not have been more than the prick of a needle.

"Didn't you once work with a Brent Foxwell?" Leila asked him over breakfast Sunday morning as she read the *Times*.

"I think so, yes," Rand answered, sipping his coffee.

"He died of a heart attack yesterday on Portobello Road, the same thing that happened to the other chap you knew."

Rand shook his head sadly. "It seems we live in stressful times." ●

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by Doug Allyn

A neon sign on the mansion's sprawling lawn said: *Miracles! Happen!* I paused a moment, considering the idea. And my fingertips strayed unconsciously to the scars on my face.

Miracles? Not likely. The way my luck usually runs, I get warm and fuzzy when I catch an even break.

The guy who owned the estate knew a bit about miracles, though. Evan Grace Ministries. Radio, TV, national politics. Not bad for a preacher who'd been touring with tent-show revivals twenty years ago. A lifetime ago.

No tents for Evan nowadays. His Grosse Pointe palace sprawls across three waterfront lots on Lake St. Clair, a Victorian manor with a stable, a six-car garage, and a state-of-the-art broadcast studio. Evan can preach a sermon in the morning, take his fat-cat contributors out to lunch, and still sleep in his own bed.

With a friend of mine.

So perhaps Miracles do Happen. Sometimes. Not very often.

A black funeral wreath was hanging on the front door. I rang the bell beside it. Chimes played the first two bars of "Amazing Grace."

A linebacker opened the door—six foot four, crew cut, a two-hundred-fifty-pound hardbody in a perfectly tailored blue suit.

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Armani, from the look of it. A black armband around the bicep.

I was wearing a black canvas duster, jeans, and a face that had been seriously rearranged by a patch of concrete.

"Yes?"

"Hi, I'm here to see Mrs. Grace. My name's Axton."

"I'm sorry, there's been a death in the family. They aren't seeing visitors."

"I'm not visiting. Mrs. Grace asked me to come by."

The linebacker looked me over doubtfully. "Under the circumstances, another day would be better. If you call—"

"She called me two hours ago, sport. If she's changed her mind, fine. But why don't you check first? Please."

Another man, equally large, materialized at my shoulder. "A problem here, Mr. Klein?"

"Not yet," the suit in the doorway said. "Keep our friend here company, Jack. Because if you're a tab reporter, we're gonna haul you out back and show you the error of your ways. Sport."

He closed the door in my face. I glanced sidelong at the new arrival. Also crew-cut, but darker, Hispanic maybe, and his suit was strictly Sears, off the rack. He was wearing a miniature earpiece with a small curly cord that vanished beneath his collar. A professional security type, not just a college boy borrowed for the day.

"What's with the wreath?" I asked.

"Maybe it's for you," Jack said. He wasn't smiling. The door opened again.

"It's okay, Jack," Klein said. "Sorry about the mix-up, Mr. Axton. It's a bad day for all of us. Follow me, please."

I trailed him down a long entrance corridor into the living room, past a dozen people dressed in black or wearing armbands, clustered in small groups, voices subdued. A few glanced up curiously. I clearly didn't belong here today. But no one said anything.

Klein led me down a second corridor, rapped once on an ornate oak door, and showed me inside. A comfortable library, floor to ceiling bookshelves, leather chairs, a fire glowing in the grate. Krystal Grace, nee Doyle, was staring into the flames, lost in thought.

Doug Allyn has penned another unforgettable tale to close out 1999. Series character "Ax" Axton has appeared in several other *EQMM* stories but this time his investigation takes him not to mean streets but to a Grosse Pointe mansion. Good news! Mr. Allyn's first collection of stories is now available: *All Creatures Dark and Dangerous*, Dr. Westbrook stories from Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA. 23505.

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Her blond hair was shorter now, worn up in a bouffant. Understatedly elegant. As was her unadorned black dress. It had been nearly ten years. It could have been ten minutes.

"Hey, Ax," she said to the fire, not turning. She was holding a brandy snifter, swirling it slowly.

"Hey, Krystal. How have you been?"

She glanced up and realized Klein was standing just inside the door. "You can leave us, Jerry."

"Mr. Grace asked me to—"

"Get the hell out!"

"Yes, ma'am." He hesitated in the doorway, memorizing my face, then vanished.

"Sorry about that," she said.

"Krys, what's up? Is this some kind of a wake or what?"

She turned back to the fire, shadows playing on her face. "Don't you watch TV? It's been all over the news."

"I've been in Cincinnati. Just got back last night."

"The wake's for . . . my son Joshua, Ax. He died yesterday."

"God. I'm sorry, Krystal. I didn't know."

"Yeah, well, it's not like it came as a big surprise. He's been dying since the day he was born. Almost two years ago. Sandhoff's disease. The doctors told us he'd be lucky to last three months. He was a lot tougher than they thought. Miracles happen. Or so they say." She took a serious draught of brandy, showing perfect teeth at the bite of it. "Oops, I'm being rude. Would you like a drink? Bourbon was your thing, right?"

"Thanks, no, I'm okay." But Krystal wasn't. She was flushed and bleary. Half bagged.

Her eyes caught mine. Then she peered at me more intently, blinking. "Good God. What happened to your face, Ax?"

"Motorcycle accident."

"Damn. It looks like it hurt." She said it deadpan, but with a glint of the old mischief I remembered so well. And then she was in my arms and we clung together a moment. Not passionately. Desperately. Like sparrows in a tornado.

For a guilty moment I savored her embrace, the scent of her hair. But the perfume was different. A lot more expensive. And it had been ten years. And we weren't scuffling kids trying to get ahead in the music business anymore.

"Thanks, I needed that," she said, stepping back. "Don't worry, I won't fall apart on you."

"Fall all you want. You're entitled."

"No, I'm not." She frowned down at the brandy snifter. "That's the thing. I don't have the right to cry. I earned every bit of this."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sandhoff's disease. Do you know anything about it?"

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"I've never heard of it."

"It's hereditary. Evan and I both have the gene. It's recessive, doesn't affect us, but the odds are three to one that any kids we have will be born with the dysfunction. Three to one. I can't watch any more babies die, Ax. That's why I called you."

"I don't understand."

"I heard you were working as a private investigator now."

"Sort of. I'm no Sherlock Holmes. Mostly I run down deadbeats and collect bad debts. Why?"

"I had another child once," she said simply. "I want you to find her for me."

"What child?"

"When I first met you, what, ten years ago? I was singing backup for Bobby Penn and the Badmen. Remember them?"

"Sure. I was managing the Roostertail when you played there. Thought you were one of the best damn singers I ever heard."

"Get real. I was strictly minor league."

"Wrong. When you sang alone the room always went quiet. People listened to you. It's a special talent, Krys."

"Maybe"—she shrugged—"but Bobby was the star and didn't let anyone forget it. I was living with him then. And I got pregnant. So I stayed behind when Bobby and the guys went on a Canadian tour. And I had a baby girl. I named her Cher." She took another long sip of brandy.

"A booking agent called, needed a backup singer for a gospel roadshow. The Evan Grace Ministry. I was flat broke so I left the kid with my landlady and took the gig. And it was . . . a revelation. Playing big churches and stadiums instead of rock joints. Everybody clean and sober. Listening to Evan preach every night, spreading the Word. It was so different from the life I was in. And I wanted it. And I wanted Evan too."

"Looks like things worked out. Some miracles must happen."

"But they come at a price. I . . . didn't tell Evan about my daughter. The people around him are pretty uptight. I figured if they knew I had a love child with a rock-'n'-roller they'd stone me or something. So I kept putting off telling him. And then he asked me to marry him and it was too late to tell him. Afraid I'd lose him. And all this," she added, with a wave of her hand.

"What about Bobby?"

"When he came back from Canada he was drugging so heavy I doubt he noticed I was gone. Until I married Evan and it made the news. And then he came around one night, wrecked. He had a picture of the baby, wanted money. For our kid, he said. I gave him all I had. A few hundred. Evan handles the money in the family. Bobby wanted more and we argued. I was angry about being held up, but mostly just angry with myself. And I'd been drinking.

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Always did have a problem with booze. Evan's security people threw Bobby out. I expected to hear from him again. But I never did. It's been nearly eight years."

"I see. Any idea where he is now?"

"No. I don't see anybody from the old days anymore. I thought you might know. You're still in the business, right?"

"I do some security work for promoters and road bands so I know a few people. But I haven't heard anything about Bobby or the Badmen for years. He was Canadian, right?"

"Yeah, and that's about all I knew about him. Except that he was a hunk. He was an orphan, or said he was. He told me once that artists can't be limited to the truth. I thought he was joking. He wasn't. But he was a wonderful liar. Very . . . creative."

"So you don't know doodley about his background and the little you know might not be true?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Terrific." I mulled that over. "Didn't Bobby and the Badmen cut a record once?"

"They had two local hits in the seventies before I joined them. Nothing big."

"Do you remember which label?"

"Something southern, I think. Raleigh?"

"Okay, that's a place to start. Can you think of anyone else who might know where he is?"

"Beans, maybe."

"Beans?"

"Fat guy, long black ponytail? Beans was the band's road manager and sound man. He and Bobby went way back."

"Yeah, I vaguely remember him. What was his real name?"

"God, I don't know. He was just . . . Beans. That's what everybody called him. I don't know if I ever knew his real name. You know how it was in those days."

"Pretty much the same as it is now. I'll be honest with you, Krys. Even if I can turn Bobby up, and that's not a gimme, your claim to the baby might be pretty shaky after all this time."

"Don't worry, I can handle Bobby. You sleep with a guy awhile, you get a pretty good idea what he's about. Bobby was beautiful and he could sing like a bird, but down deep . . ."

"What?"

"That's just it. There wasn't anything down deep. No soul. Maybe he traded it for his looks, I don't know. You've got to find my daughter for me, Ax. Please. I know I screwed up, but I can make it up to her. I have to. I can't go on like this."

That much was true. If I've ever seen anyone on the lip of the abyss it was Krystal Grace. I didn't know if finding her lost child

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would help. What she really needed was rest and counseling and support. Or maybe a Miracle! from the sign out front.

But considering my shambles of a life, I'm the last person who can offer advice. Especially to an old friend in a world of hurt. So I kept my mouth shut and set out to do my job.

I didn't get very far. Klein, the linebacker, met me in the hallway and said Mr. Grace wanted to see me before I left. He didn't bother to say please.

We took an elevator down to the broadcast studio in the basement. I'd seen Evan Grace's gospel broadcasts a time or two, usually at 3 A.M. on Christian stations. He's a terrific talker with a good band who can bring a crowd to its feet. Or its knees. Or so I'd thought.

The cameras and equipment on the soundstage were top of the line, the latest and best from Sennheiser, Bose, and AKG. But there was no seating area for an audience in the room. The front of the stage faced a wide blue screen. Interesting.

Evan Grace's inner office was the size of my apartment: thick carpeting, leather chairs, walls covered with gold-framed, autographed photographs. Evan posing with Nixon, with Pat Robertson, Tipper Gore.

The man himself was sitting at an antique desk, his face buried in his hands. He glanced up when we came in.

He was in shirtsleeves and looked haggard. His usually flawless silver pompadour was mussed, hanging in his eyes. Even so, he was magnetic. Charisma, stage presence, whatever you call it, Evan Grace had it. Bobby Penn had it too, as I recalled.

He eyed me a moment in silence, sizing me up. "What does the other guy look like?" he asked.

I smiled. At least he was direct. "The other guy was Eight Mile Road. Motorcycle accident."

"Very impressive. I imagine it helps you in your work."

"My work?"

"Intimidation is part of your line, isn't it? When Krystal said she wanted to hire you, I had you checked out, Mr. Axton. You have an investigator's license and a concealed-weapons permit. You do collection work for nightclubs and booking agencies, and occasionally hire out as a bodyguard. People you've worked for say you're honest and tenacious to a fault. And a little crazy."

"Sounds fair. So?"

"I'll be blunt. My wife is in no condition emotionally to make decisions that could affect her entire life. And mine. I'll be happy to reimburse you for your time and trouble, but we won't be requiring your services."

"Sorry, but it doesn't work that way."

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"She can't pay you, Axton. I control the purse strings and I guarantee you'll never see a dime."

"Actually, Krystal and I never got around to discussing a fee, so I guess this one's on the house. Call it Christian charity."

"Are you mocking my beliefs, Mr. Axton?"

"Not at all. I have a question, though. That blue screen facing the broadcast dais? How do you morph the audiences in?"

He eyed me a moment, then shrugged. "We film the crowds when I speak at churches and halls. The congregations you see on television are mine, they just don't happen to be in the studio at broadcast time. A miracle of the electronic sort. Why?"

"Just wondered. Look, Reverend, I know this is a tough time for you and I sympathize, but Krystal asked me to do this thing, I agreed, and that's it. And right now she's alone and half plastered. You should be talking to her, not me."

"You intend to press on with this? Over my objections? Are you a Christian, Mr. Axton?"

"Probably not by your standards, no."

"I'm not surprised. I imagine genuine Christian values could be a drawback in your line."

"Actually, I think my line and yours are both a lot like making sausage, Reverend. The less people know about how we do it, the better off they are. Tell Krystal I'll be in touch."

Halfway between floors, Klein hit the elevator stop button and turned to face me.

"You shouldn't have talked to Reverend Grace like that."

"Like what?"

"Disrespectfully. When a man like him asks you to do something, you do it."

"If I was working for him, I probably would. But I'm not."

"Then I'll make it simple. When you say no to Reverend Grace, you're saying no to me. Your face has already been rearranged once. I could do it again."

"Maybe. But not in this elevator."

"Why not?"

"Because people are in mourning upstairs, Jerry. I doubt your boss would appreciate a dustup in the middle of it. No matter who won."

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Hell, you don't look like you're afraid of anything. Which makes me think you've led a pretty quiet life. Up to now. So? You wanna take your best shot? Or restart the elevator?"

"Maybe this isn't the time or the place, Axton. But your time's coming."

"I hope so. I'd hate to think it was past."

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Krystal was half right. Raleigh Records was southern. Southern Michigan. South of Detroit, in Ecorse, to be exact. A rundown studio in a block of dilapidated warehouses off West Jefferson. Raleigh Productions: Rollie Newcomb, president, chief financial officer, salesman, packing clerk, secretary, janitor. Whatever. Strictly a scuffler.

I found Rollie working the phone in his second-floor office, trying to peddle the crates of CDs, tapes, and old LPs stacked in the open bay beyond. In the fifties and sixties, Rollie cut sides with Jackie Wilson, Mitch Ryder, and other Motown hometown heroes. A few hit it big later on, but not Rollie. He was stuck in Ecorse, selling second-rate recordings by stars who were nobodies at the time, or nobodies who stayed that way. Like . . .

"Bobby Penn and the Badmen?" Rollie said, eyeing me warily. Rollie's fat, sixty, and still wears polyester leisure suits. And not because he's into retro styles. "Is business so bad you're down to working for the Badmen these days, Ax?"

"I thought they were defunct."

"Went belly-up years ago. But sometimes a member of a group tries to use the name. If you're looking for their royalties, you're out of luck. Penn made all the contracts in his name only. The Badmen weren't even named individually on the album jacket, which was just as well since he bagged two of 'em in the middle of the session. Bobby hired and fired people so fast if you lined all the former Badmen up they'd look like the Million Man March. Bobby's got some dough coming, though. He hire you?"

"No. Actually I'm trying to find him for somebody else."

"A drug dealer?"

"Hell no. Why?"

"Because the first couple of years after he split, at least a half-dozen slimeball dope dealers came around looking for him. He owed everybody."

"Since when do dealers extend credit?"

"Oh, Bobby was slick, I'll give him that. Kid could schmooze the Statue of Liberty out of her concrete skivvies. So what's up? You lookin' to bust his legs?" He sounded hopeful.

"Nah, I don't do that kind of work. I'm just trying to run him down. A matter of paternity."

"You're kidding. He reproduced? How? In a pond with the rest of the scum? I hope you burn him for every dime he's got."

"I have to find him first."

"Can't help you there, Ax, but I'm holding eighteen hundred bucks of Bobby's money. If you find him, maybe we can work something out."

"What money?"

"Royalty checks. I packaged Bobby with a dozen other lousy

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groups, called it *Garage Band Nobodies,* and put it on the Internet for the collector market. It's been selling pretty well. His career's doing better since he quit the business."

"What makes you think he quit?"

"If he was still playing, somebody'd mention the record and three seconds later he'd be on the phone screaming for his cut and then some. He had a nose for a buck, that one."

"So you've got no idea where he is?"

"Not a clue. And no loss."

"What about his pal, Beans? Remember him?"

"Yeah, heavyset guy? Beans Marino?"

"Was that his name? Marino?"

"Yeah. He was Bobby's road manager, so he signed off on the equipment rentals for the studio. Not a bad guy. In fact, I tried to hire him, but he and Bobby went way back. Boyhood pals or something. Can't remember his first name but it was something like Beans. Dean or Gene or something."

Not Dean or Gene. After leaving Rollie's studio, I went back to my apartment office, fired up my computer, ran a couple of name searches, and scored. Benno Marino, Mr. and Mrs., lived upstate in the boonies, in northern Oakland County near the Mount Holly ski resort.

I called, got a lady with a delicious southern accent, told her I needed to talk to Benno about the royalties Rollie owed Bobby, and made an appointment for that evening.

Driving upstate is always a mindbender. Detroit's a sprawling rustbelt relic frantically reinventing itself. Casinos a-building, warehouses imploding, housing exploding everywhere.

But drive forty minutes north of the city and you're in Hicksville, U.S.A.—heavily wooded hills where transplants from Tupelo and Texarkana build replicas of the back-country shacks where they were fetched up. Plus a few amenities like hot tubs, central air, and satellite TV.

The Marino place was a mountain ranch house sided in rough cedar. Perched on a bluff with a view of gently rolling hills to the south, it had an odd look as I approached. I didn't realize what was out of place until I pulled into the driveway. Instead of steps, a ramp led up to the broad front porch and another around to the side door. Wheelchair ramps.

The woman who answered the door resolved the riddle. She was in a power wheelchair, though she looked healthy enough to get up and run a ten-minute mile: chubby, rosy cheeks, dark hair trimmed in a pageboy bob.

"Mrs. Marino? My name's Axton. I called."

"I'm Jeanie. Ben's not home yet, but come in. Sorry about the ramps; a drunk driver clipped me seven years ago. This way." She

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backed away from the door and I followed her into a brightly tiled country kitchen, copper pots, a brick island in the center, everything waist high. Wheelchair height.

She offered coffee and I accepted, taking a seat at the long pine kitchen table. She looked at me oddly as she poured.

"I know you, right? Didn't you manage the Roostertail when we played there."

"We?"

"I was a backup singer for Bobby Penn. The other backup singer," she added wryly. "Krystal's the one people remember—tall, blond, and talented. I was the short, chubby country kid. You called me Alabam, because of my accent. Remember?"

And I did. A bouncing bundle of eager energy with a southern drawl. For an instant I saw her as she was in the old days, so vital . . . and then I was seeing her now. The woman in a steel chair. And then our eyes met, and I realized with a jolt that she was seeing me exactly the same way.

"My God," she said wonderingly. "Look at us. Dick Clark hasn't aged a minute in twenty years and the two of us look like we've been chewed up by an alligator and crapped in a ditch."

She shook her head with an infectious chuckle that swept us both along until we were gasping. Sometimes life kicks you so hard all you can do is laugh. And she had the gift for it.

"Is something funny?"

Lost in the moment, I hadn't heard him come in. Wouldn't have recognized him anyway. Beans had lost most of his hair, slimmed down forty pounds, and was wearing a tailored three-piece suit. And toting a briefcase.

"Mr. Marino? My name's Axton."

"Right. Jeanie called me at the office, told me you'd be stopping by. Something about royalties?"

"Raleigh Records owes Bobby Penn back royalties, yes. Are you still in touch with him?"

"Slow down a minute. Can I see some ID, please?"

"Sure." I gave him my wallet and he looked over my license carefully. Jeanie watched, amused. Her normal state, I think.

"So why do you want Bobby? And skip the royalties garbage. Nobody hires private heat to find somebody they owe. Especially not Rollie Newcomb. We may live in the sticks, but we're not hicks. Either tell it straight or hit the door."

"Fair enough. Bobby's one-time squeeze, Krystal, hired me to find him."

"No kidding? After all this time? Why?"

"I'm afraid that's between Krystal and Bobby."

"It doesn't matter anyway. I haven't heard from Bobby in years. I've no idea where he is, and I wouldn't tell you if I did. For the

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record, Bobby and I not only worked together back when, we grew up in the same orphanage in Windsor. We were like blood to each other. What kind of a jam is he in?"

"Why do you think he's in a jam?"

"That guy was born in trouble. What is it this time?"

"He's not jammed up, but that's all I'm free to say."

"Okay, let's try another angle. Does Krystal really want to find Bobby? Or is she looking for the kid?"

I leaned forward involuntarily. "Do you know where the child is?"

"Nope, but I know what happened to it. It's the reason Bobby and I broke it off."

"How do you mean?"

"Bobby was always like a crazy little brother to me. He was a helluva talented singer, but he had a nose for dope along with it. Bailing him out of jackpots was my full-time job when we worked the road together. The Badmen played every hole-in-the-wall joint between Cedar Rapids and Toronto and I saw Bobby pull some crappy stunts, but I always figured, he's young, he'll grow up. But with Krystal and the baby he was so far over the line I realized he was never gonna change. A guy who could do that . . ."

"Do what?"

"He sold the baby," Marino said evenly. "His own child. Peddled it like a used car."

"There's a gray market for babies, especially healthy white kids," Marino explained. We were sitting at his kitchen table over coffee and sandwiches Jeanie whipped up. I offered to help, but Marino warned me off with a look. She might be in a chair, but she was far from helpless. In fact, I noted a short-barreled shotgun at the end of the counter behind the kitchen door. Jeanie caught me eyeing it.

"Insurance," she said. "We're a long way from help out here and one thing you learn on the road is, Lord, there are some strange folks loose in this world. No offense."

"None taken. I resemble that remark," I said, and she smiled. I shifted to her husband. "What can you tell me about Bobby selling the kid?"

"The group broke up after Jeanie's accident. We got married and I started working my way through Oakland U. driving a garbage truck on the night shift. I'm a purchasing exec with the highway department now," he added ruefully. "Go figure. Anyway, one afternoon Bobby showed up out of nowhere. He was strung out on smack, said he needed my help."

"To do what?"

"He said he wanted to do the right thing by his kid, give her a

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chance to be with a good family. Wanted me to go with him. You gotta understand, coming from the background we did, giving up his kid was a pretty heavy step. Still, Krystal dumped her on him, and he was in no shape to cope. He could barely take care of himself. Adoption seemed like the right thing."

"What happened?"

"We drove into Motown to the Renaissance Center, but instead of an agency, we go to a lawyer's office. Bobby told me the guy arranges adoptions, but two minutes into the conversation I realize they're not talking about whether the kid will have a good life. They're just dickering over the price. I couldn't believe it. I blew up. Big mistake. Two bruisers came busting in, told me I could leave by the elevator or the window, my choice. We were on the twenty-third floor."

"So you took the elevator."

"Out of that building. And out of Bobby's life."

"Do you know for a fact that he sold the child?"

"I only saw him once after that, just long enough to tell him to get lost. He didn't have the kid anymore."

"Do you remember the lawyer's name?"

"Zeman. Anthony Zeman."

He was watching my face for a reaction. "Damn," I said.

"Mr. Axton, are you expecting company?" Jeanie said, glancing out the kitchen window.

"No, why?"

"A white Cadillac's coming up our road. We don't get much company out here. I guess when it rains, it pours."

"Well, I'll leave you to your guests," I said, rising. "Thanks for your help."

Marino walked me out on the porch just as the Cadillac's doors opened. And four neatly dressed linebacker types climbed out: Jerry Klein, his pal Jack, and two more just like them. A matched set of muscle.

"Is the child here, Axton?" Klein asked, trotting up the ramp.

"No. These people have nothing to do with it."

"You'll excuse me if I don't take your word for it. We'll just take a quick look."

"Whoa," Marino said, "where do you think you're going?"

"Inside," Klein said. "We have reason to believe you may be involved in a kidnapping. Stand aside."

"The hell I will! Who are you people—?"

Without warning, Klein drove a fist into Marino's belly, spinning him face-first into the wall, dropping him to his knees. I yanked Klein around but before either of us could swing, a shotgun blast shattered the air, freezing everyone.

Jeanie Marino came humming around the side of the house in

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her chair, the short double-barreled shotgun cradled in her arms. The shot she'd fired had perforated the Cadillac in a dozen places. For a silent moment the only sound was the Caddy's rear tire wheezing flat.

"That's enough," Jeanie said quietly. "You boys had best git in your car and go. While you can."

"Lady, you'd better put that gun down—"

"Save your breath. Get moving. Now."

Klein licked his lips. "You've only got one round left in that thing."

"That's right. Who wants it? You?" She shifted the weapon to cover Jack. His eyes widened, staring down the double barrels.

"Jesus, lady!"

From his knees, Marino launched himself up at Klein, tackling him waist-high, tumbling him down the ramp into the dirt at Jack's feet. Without a word, Jack hauled Klein up and thrust him into the Caddy's passenger seat. The other two piled in as Jack slid behind the wheel, fired up the Caddy, and roared off, thumping down the dirt road on their flattened tire.

"Honey, are you all right?" Jeanie asked.

"Yeah, I think so. What the hell was all that, Axton?"

"Security types. They work for Krystal's husband. I'm sorry, I had no idea they were coming."

"Yeah, well, sorry doesn't quite cover it." Marino winced as he massaged his ribs and touched a cut on the corner of his mouth. "We've told you what we know, now I want you out of here. We've got a new life. We don't need any crap from the old days."

"Understood," I said. "And I really am sorry."

"Stuff happens," Jeanie said, humming up to me, offering a firm hand. "Maybe you can come back again sometime. Say in another ten years?" The twinkle in her eyes took the sting from the zinger.

"It's a date. In another ten years."

"Do you remember the lawyer's name?" Marino called after me.

"Yeah. I'm afraid so."

Afraid was the word. The name Zeman runs through the legends of the Motown mob the way Capone's does in Chicago. Only there were a lot more Zemans than Capones. Brothers, cousins, uncles. The grandfather was a member of the original Purple Gang, a stone killer who always carried three automatics. Or so they say. His grandsons pack law degrees or MBAs, which makes them a lot more dangerous.

Back in the late thirties, Capone sent two thugs to Detroit to talk to the Purples about an alliance. They disappeared. No warnings, no threats, no horse's head in a bed. They just vanished. The way Jimmy Hoffa would a few years later.

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Damn! Why did I have to think of that story in the elevator heading up to Anthony Zeman's office?

The offices of Barrett, Arlington, and Zeman occupy most of a floor in the Renaissance Center. Twenty-three stories up. The place was busier than a wacko ward during a full moon, but I had no trouble getting in to see Tony Zeman, Jr. Just by saying I was a licensed investigator who wanted to talk about babies.

Zeman came around the desk carrying a golf club. A squat, powerful man, heavily built. Almond shirt and slacks, dark hair, thinning on top, blue jowls. Fortunately, the club wasn't for me.

"Do you mind? I've got a foursome at one." He lined up a few balls, squared his stance, and began putting them toward a narrow electronic cup against the wall. It beeped each time he scored. He never missed. "What can I do for you, Mr. . . .?"

"Axton. I'm looking into an . . . adoption you arranged eight years ago or so."

Zeman shrugged, loosening up. "We handle some adoptions through this office, but all data concerning them is confidential, as I assume you know. So why are you wasting my time?"

"Because there may be a problem with this one. My clients are wealthy and determined. If you blow me off, they'll go to the police and they have the political juice to make things messy. No one wants that. Just give me what I need and I go away. No problem."

He glanced up. Light gray eyes, cold as Rouge River ice. "If I thought you were a real problem you'd be gone already. What do you want? Exactly?"

"The man who arranged the adoption was Bobby Penn. Tall, scruffy blond hair?"

"A singer or something? Claimed he had a few hit records in the seventies?"

"That's the guy."

"Then I definitely can't help you. We didn't handle that case. I only recall it because Penn brought a buddy who kicked up a fuss. I had them escorted out."

"The pal says he was thrown out. But Bobby wasn't."

Zeman paused in mid stroke, frowning, then followed through. "Actually, he's right about that. Penn did stay a bit longer to plead his case. But we didn't do a deal."

"No?"

"No," Zeman said, straightening, examining the head of the putter. "Let me enlighten you about the work we do, Mr. Axton. When sufficient capital is involved, and those are the only cases we take, finding eligible children is no problem. Appalachia, Russia, former Iron Curtain countries, it's a buyer's market. So to speak. We arrange proper health care, cover hospital expenses, and the mothers have the comfort of knowing their babies will be

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placed with families who can afford our services. And if those families sometimes offer a . . . gift to soothe the young mother's anguish, that's no concern of ours. Are you with me?"

"So far."

"Good. Then you must see that the scenario I've just outlined has no place in it for your Mr. Penn. He was a junkie, so was the baby for all I knew, and it was seven or eight months old. We only deal in—excuse me, arrange adoptions for—newborns. It simplifies the paperwork."

"And an eight-month-old could have its name and footprints on file in the hospital where it had been born. Which could present problems if anything derailed later on."

"Exactly. Which is why I never seriously considered doing a deal with Mr. Penn. The man had trouble tattooed on his forehead. His pal got out of line that day and now you're here. I don't like problems, Mr. Axton. But I'm very good at solving them. Are you going to be a problem for me?"

"I don't know," I said. "I hope not."

Sulka tie and his precious Ping putter aside, Anthony Zeman was a thug, the son and grandson of thugs. And he was apparently still in the baby business, tap-dancing through legal loopholes to supply desperate people with the ultimate treasure. For a price. Doubtless using the same rationale his grandpop used to justify running booze across the Rouge from Canada during Prohibition, and numbers, drugs, and hookers since.

Victimless crimes. Unless you somehow get crossways of the Zemans, in which case they'll make you a victim in a heartbeat. Maybe even a vanishing victim.

I had no doubt Tony Zeman would lie like a pol on election night if it suited his purposes. But that didn't mean he'd lied to me. He wanted me gone with minimum fuss. If the truth would make me disappear faster than a lie, why not tell it?

And I was fairly sure he had. He was running a lucrative operation, judging from his pricey office and polished golf game. Would he jeopardize it for one junkie's kid?

Unlikely. Besides, Marino pitched a bitch in Tony's office. If the deal had closed, Marino could have posed a threat to the Zeman family business. And he probably wouldn't be breathing.

But he was. I found him at his desk in an open, airy second-floor office of the state highway department building in Pontiac. He wasn't pleased to see me. I didn't blame him. His jaw had an angry red souvenir of my last visit.

"I'm sorry to bother you again," I said hastily, before he could rip into me. "I only need a moment. Zeman didn't do a deal with

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Bobby that day, so I'm back to square one. You said you saw Bobby once after the thing with Zeman. Did he say anything about where he was living? What he was doing?"

"We didn't talk that long. And what makes you think Zeman didn't buy the kid? Because he said so?"

"I wouldn't take Zeman's word that the sun'll rise tomorrow, but I believe him about this. Bobby didn't make that deal. Can you think of anything that might help me get a line on him?"

Marino started to shake his head, then hesitated. "That last time, he was with another guy. A biker named Little Vern. One of the Mountain Outlaws."

"The Outlaws?"

"Yeah, towards the end, our band developed a biker following. They adopted us, like mascots. Which gives you some idea how far down we were. I never ran with those guys, but Bobby did. By their standards, he was a celebrity. So they shared their dope with him, and sometimes women. He and Vern were talking about going on a run that weekend. It was late summer, August, I think. I didn't care where they were going, I just wanted them gone. And now I want you gone."

"I understand and—"

"Don't say thanks, Mr. Axton. Just say goodbye."

It could have been worse. Bobby could have been running with the Manson family when he disappeared. The Mountain Outlaws, a.k.a. The Mounts, aren't the wildest dogs in the murky underworld of Motown motorcycle gangs, but they're close to it.

With over a hundred members, a private clubhouse, and their own bar, they're well off by biker standards. But they're not a collection of misunderstood romantics.

The Mounts take the Outlaw half of their name seriously. They're major players in the amphetamine trade; they hire out as freelance muscle and drug couriers for the Five Families in Saginaw. The hard-core leaders are all ex-cons, and most of them are speed freaks to boot, the human equivalent of wolverines with hyperaggressive tendencies.

I'd met a few Mounts over the years, mostly when I bounced them out of various nightclubs I'd been running. Couldn't remember whether I'd made any lasting enemies. Hoped not.

For once, my road-burned face wasn't a drawback. When I wandered into the Mountain Lounge, the Outlaws' stomping grounds, I looked like I belonged. Almost.

It was an ordinary neighborhood bar—dim, two pool tables, a few pinball machines, and a jukebox against the wall. Formica tables carved with initials and obscenities.

The odd points were subtle but telling. High, narrow windows

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offered light but no entry, and the only doors were reinforced steel with hinged cross-braces. One second after they slammed shut, you'd have better luck trying to break in through the wall. And no way out at all.

Early afternoon, the place was nearly deserted. A couple of bikers were shooting pool while a buddy kibitzed. Four more, at a table near the jukebox, were playing euchre.

The bartender was a scrawny burnout, one-forty tops, scruffy brown hair styled with pruning shears, tattooed arms, watery eyes. He looked like a punk any high-school jock could mop the floor with. But if he was tending bar in a place like this . . .

I ordered a Bud Light. He made no move to get it.

"You're not from around here."

"Nope. But my beer is. It's in the cooler behind you."

"So it is." He reached into the cooler, retrieved a can, and slammed it down on the bar with a bang. "Whoa, don't open that, pal, it'll spray. Take it with you. Drink it down the road."

"Can't do that. Thing is, I'm looking for a guy. Not one of yours. A guy named Penn who used to hang with a Mount called Little Vern." I didn't catch the signal but suddenly I had a pool player on each side of me, still holding their cue sticks.

"Can't help ya," the bartender said, his eyes locked on mine. "Try the phone book. Might be a Little Vern in there."

"Or try Forest Lawn," one of the card players said, standing up, stretching. "That's where Vern is. Take him a flower. He probably doesn't get many. You're Axton, right?"

I turned to face him. He looked vaguely familiar but they all did, like wolves from the same pack. "Do I know you?"

"Not exactly. You threw me out of the Thirteenth Hour Club once."

"Could be. I worked there. You sore about it?"

He eyed me a moment, his face unreadable. He was taller than the others, pitted face, a leather Harley hat. And I was one second from the emergency ward. Until he smiled, showing broken teeth.

"Hell, you did me a favor, bro. I was ready to beat the bejesus out of a mama who wasn't worth the jail time. Maybe I owe you one. Why are you lookin' for Vern?"

"To ask him about a guy he ran with. Bobby Penn? Singer? Had a band called the Badmen?"

"Penn. Yeah, I remember that loser. Goes back a ways."

"To when?"

"I don't know. Seven, eight years ago. Vern brought him in, thought he was some kinda hotshot superstar just because he played in a band. Vern wasn't too bright, which is why he's dead. Passed on a hill. Met a cattle truck head-on."

"Sorry to hear it. What about Penn?"

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"Last time I saw him he was crawlin' towards that door."

"Crawling?"

"Maybe Vern thought he was special, but he was just another junkie mooch to the rest of us. He got crossways of somebody, got decked, a few guys did the boogie on his sorry ass. Nothin' heavy. Like I said, he crawled out."

"What was the beef about?"

"Who knows? It don't take much for an outsider to get stomped in here. Probably just pushed his luck."

I didn't push mine. Pushed off instead. Headed out into a gray, overcast afternoon. After the dingy twilight of the bar the air seemed especially sweet. Sometimes just being alive is enough.

But the feeling only lasted seven or eight miles, then I realized I had no idea where I was heading.

The road goes on forever, but my hunt for Bobby Penn had zeroed out. The computer search had nothing current, no driver's license, no Social Security payments or welfare checks, no cars registered in his name. Nothing for the past seven years.

If Penn was a straight john I'd assume he was dead or in a witness-protection program. But the music business runs by different rules. Club owners pay under the table to duck taxes, players bunk with pals to avoid having a legal residence, singers change their names for professional reasons. Or no reason at all.

Seven years ago Bobby Penn hit rock bottom. Then what? A name change, a fresh start? Not likely. His name had some market value because his records were still selling a little.

A career change? Also unlikely. All he knew was the music business . . . and there it was. The answer.

Bobby Penn might be a loser, but he was also a professional musician. Whose records were still selling.

I drove aimlessly for a while, mulling over how that played out. But the bottom line was: I didn't know quite enough.

I killed an hour by driving into Detroit Metro Airport to ditch my car in long-term parking and rent an anonymous gray Chevy. Then I drove to Pontiac, parked down the street from the state employees' lot, and waited the half-hour until five.

Ben Marino came out promptly, fired up his van, and pulled out of the lot. I gave him a two-block lead, then followed. In the first quarter-mile I knew he wasn't headed home. He seemed to be trailing a car that had left the lot just ahead of him, a guess he confirmed by turning left on Logan into the upscale Pinewood subdivision. Both cars pulled into the same driveway in front of a gray-brick townhouse.

I started to turn off, to avoid being spotted, but changed my

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mind when a miniature dervish came sprinting out of the house to throw herself into Marino's arms. He was swinging the child around as I cruised past. It had been years since I'd seen Bobby Penn, but I had no doubt the girl was his daughter. I'd always thought Krystal looked like an angel down on her luck. Her daughter looked like the real thing, baby Cupid in blue denim bibs.

I drove on a few blocks, then pulled into a driveway, turned around, and parked in the shadow of a tall hedge. I couldn't see the house, but I could still see the rear of Marino's van. Rather than risk a confrontation here, I decided to wait until he left. It wasn't long.

As I was settling in to wait, a figure suddenly stepped through the hedge, leaned down, and tapped on the passenger window of my rental Chevy. Marino. And he was tapping with the muzzle of a 9mm automatic.

Any thoughts I had of running for it evaporated when I read his eyes. I popped the electric door lock and he slid in beside me, the gun leveled at my midsection.

"Let's go," he said.

"Where?"

"Out to Twenty-four, then north." Not to his home then. Bad omen.

"Look, you can't—"

"Shut up and drive or I'll pop you right here. Your choice."

I shut up and drove, out of the business district on M-24, then north into the boondocks. The farther we went, the less I liked it, but there was nothing I could do. We were both belted in, and Marino kept the automatic on me. His eyes were somewhere else, though, in some inner place. Deciding what to do with me.

And then he relaxed a little, the decision taken. I tried to read his face with a glance, but it showed me nothing.

The few directions he offered took us farther into the empty countryside through barren fields, already harvested, a few isolated farms so widely scattered that a distant gunshot wouldn't raise an eyebrow.

The sun was setting when Marino suddenly tensed. "Slow down here, turn right on the next dirt road."

I did as he said, wheeling down a narrow two-rut lane that circled the base of a towering mound. The fading light dimmed, then we suddenly plunged into deep shadows as the hilltop blocked the sunset, engulfing us. I reached for the headlight switch but Marino shook his head.

"No lights. Stop here."

We climbed out of the car beside a tall, chain-link fence topped

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with barbed wire. Marino motioned me ahead, keeping his distance, his gun trained on my spine.

"Hold up right here."

In the dimness I could make out a gate secured with a padlock. He unlocked it, swung it open just far enough to let us pass, then motioned me through.

There was no place to go but up. As we climbed the hill in the gloom I could make out wider white shapes in the distance. And my heart sank. They vaguely resembled tombstones, but in a way they were even worse.

My calves were aching from the strain of the long climb when the shadows above me began to lighten, then glow, then suddenly we broke into the auburn light on the crest of the hill. The massive grassy hillside sprawled out below us for most of a mile, bathed in the glow of the dying sun, marked at regular intervals by white plastic pipes.

A landfill, a cavernous hole filled with a mountain of garbage, then covered with earth and seeded with grass. In these hills it could almost pass for a natural rise. Except for the PVC pipes that vented the gases generated by the corruption below.

I turned slowly to face Marino. "What now?"

"I don't know. You're a pain in the ass, you know that? I asked you to leave us alone. More than once."

"You also pointed me at two dead-end leads, hoping one or the other would run me off."

"Too bad it didn't work. So we're down to it now. You were dead set on finding Bobby. Here he is."

"Where?"

"I'd guess seventy, maybe eighty feet down. This wasn't a hill then, it was still a pit. I worked here in those days and had a key. Still do. It was night and I was pretty wrung out when I brought him here, so I don't have a real clear recollection of where I put him exactly. I remember carrying him through that gate, though, so we're close."

"What happened?"

"What I told you. He stopped by with that guy from the Outlaws. Bobby wanted to leave his dope stash with me so the bikers wouldn't rip him off. Figured he could mooch off them. And he said we had to come to a permanent arrangement about the kid. I knew he meant money, only I didn't have any. I was working my way through school, driving a trash truck on the night shift. Jeanie's legs were still in casts from the accident, but she was dragging herself around to care for the baby."

"The child was living with you then?"

"She's been with us since she was a few months old. Krystal took off to work with a gospel show and dumped the kid on her

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landlady. When the band came back from Canada, Bobby picked Cher up and left her with us. We're the only parents she's ever had."

"You never adopted her?"

"A garbageman with a handicapped wife? We didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of keeping her without Bobby's consent. I was an orphan myself, I know the drill."

"And Bobby?"

"He came back a few nights later, roughed up pretty bad. Said some of the Mounts had worked him over. Hadn't fixed in a couple days, had the shakes really bad. Talking crazy. About how he'd use the money I'd pay him for the kid to get his career going. And if I couldn't pay him, he'd go back to Zeman, offer him a deal he couldn't turn down. Like a fire sale or something."

"What did you do?"

"I looked at him," he said simply. "Maybe for the first time, I saw what he'd turned into. We grew up together like brothers, but this wasn't about us, it was about a child, *his* child. And about Jeanie. She loved that kid more than her life. So I sat at the kitchen table with Bobby and dickered for the kid over a bottle of Cuervo. He was hurtin' pretty bad, so he killed most of it. And then he needed to fix, so I gave him his stash. He shot up, and I put him to bed on the couch. And, um . . ."

He looked away and took a deep breath. His eyes were unfocused, seeing something a long way off, a long time ago. And he was trembling. With pain or rage, I couldn't tell.

"A couple of hours later I heard him groaning. He was sick. Between the booze and the drugs and the beating, he should've been in a hospital. But instead of getting help, I . . . I asked him if he wanted another fix. For the pain. And he said yes.

"I took him his works but he was shaking so bad he couldn't do it. So I . . . did it for him. I shot him up. And he *knew*.

"He watched me load up. He knew what another hit would do on top of the junk he'd already done. And he didn't care. He looked in my eyes . . . and then he offered me his arm. He was my brother. And I put him to sleep like a dog."

He fell silent for a while. The sun dropped lower, pine shadows from the trees at the base of the hill crept up toward us. I didn't say anything. No point.

"I'll never get past what I did," he continued softly. "But I'd gotten to where I could live with it, to make a good life for Jeanie and Cher. Then I saw the news about Krys and her husband losing their kid and you called asking about Bobby. We figured something was up and stashed Cher with my in-laws. Only you wouldn't let it go. How did you know?"

"In my business, you learn to follow the money."

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"What money?"

"Newcomb's royalties. Bobby was obviously on the skids, ready to peddle his own blood for a few bucks. But he was also a pro musician. He should have remembered that royalty money and tried for it. Since he didn't, I guessed he was probably dead. Only there was no record of that, so he didn't die in bed.

"Either Zeman or the Outlaws could have waxed him, but they talked to me. If they'd taken him out they would have stonewalled or run me off. The last time anybody saw Bobby, he was crawling, banged up pretty badly. I figured he'd go to you. He had nowhere else."

"And now he's here. Someplace."

"And so are we. You figuring to plant me with Bobby?"

He eyed me a moment, then swallowed. "That's why I brought you here. I almost killed you back in town. Maybe I should have."

"And now?"

"Hell, this isn't your mess," he said, lowering his weapon, "it's mine."

"Offhand, I'd say Bobby made most of it. You carried the weight for him his whole life and you still are. You're even raising his child."

"Up to now, you mean. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. But I've spent as much time on this dump as I care to. Let's go."

"No. You go ahead. I think I'll sit here awhile. I don't come here often. Maybe I should. I've got a cell phone, I can call a friend for a ride. Go on."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Funny, Bobby used to say someday he'd be so famous they'd put him on Mount Rushmore. This is as close as he got."

"Half a dream's not bad. Most of us never get that much."

I left him sitting on the crest of his trash mountain, his arms folded across his knees, staring into the last rays of the sunset. And far beyond it, I suppose.

The walk down the hill was easier than the climb, maybe because I figured to be alive at the bottom. But the drive back to the airport was troublesome.

What I'd told Marino was absolutely true. I had no idea what to do about this. In the end, it came down to the fact that I'd given Krys my word. That covered the situation as far as I was concerned. Somebody else would have to sort it out.

I set up a meeting with Krystal and Evan Grace in his basement office that night. The studio was abuzz when I arrived, twenty minutes to airtime. No problem. However things worked out, this wouldn't take long.

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Evan was in shirtsleeves, sitting behind his desk making last-second corrections on a script. His pompadour was broadcast perfect and a makeup bib was draped over his collar to shield it from smears. Jerry Klein ushered me in, then waited by the door, his eyes locked on me like radar.

Krystal was pacing in front of the desk, elegant in a peasant blouse and slacks. She looked like she hadn't slept at all, and one more missed meal would bump her from stylishly slender to anorexic.

Judging by her cautious steps, the drink in her hand wasn't her first. Or her second. Evan ignored me, totally focused on his work. And making a point about our positions. I waited.

"So, Mr. Axton," he said, glancing up at last. "You asked for this meeting. I assume you have something for us?"

I said yes. Or started to. Instead, I heard myself saying, "I'm afraid there was nothing to find, Reverend Grace. The baby was taken to a law firm that arranges adoptions. Their records are confidential and they have the legal muscle to keep them that way. There's nothing more I can do. I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize," Evan said, trying to conceal his satisfaction. "We knew it was a faint hope at best. We'll just have to find the strength to move on. I'm sorry to seem abrupt, but I'm due on the set. Send me your bill, Mr. Axton. I'll see to it." He swept out of the room with Klein at his heels.

"You're going to burn in hell, Axton," Krystal said quietly.

"Probably," I said, turning to face her.

"Definitely. Evan's a minister of the Gospel, and you just looked him straight in the eye and lied your butt off. Didn't you?"

It wasn't a question. She knew. I don't know how, but she did.

"Look, I'm not angry but I want the truth, Ax. And don't waste any more smoke. You're not a very good liar."

"I'll try to do better. Evan didn't seem to notice, though."

"Because you told him what he wanted to hear. What really happened? Did you find Bobby?"

"No. And no one ever will. He's gone, Krystal."

"I thought he might be. He was pretty strung out when I saw him last. I expected him to hit me up for money again. When he didn't . . ." She shrugged. "It's too bad. He was a beautiful man once. What happened to him?"

I hesitated. "An overdose."

"God. What a waste. What a godawful waste. And the baby?"

"She's fine. She's happy and healthy and with good people."

"But you weren't going to tell me that, were you? You bastard!"

I had no answer for that. She was right.

She took a long pull at her drink, emptying the glass. Then turned to face me. "It's all right, Ax. I was in so much pain when

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Joshua died that I needed . . . something. A miracle, maybe. A reason to live. I thought Cher could give it to me. But thinking about it the past few days, I realized it was all about me, not her. She's nearly eight, but I didn't try to find her until *I* was in trouble. Some people are natural mothers. I'm not. But that doesn't mean I can't be a friend. Does it?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then I want to ask a favor. I know I'm a mess, I have been for a while. But I'm going to get some help to dry out and get myself together. If I do, will you fix it so I can meet her?"

"I can't promise that, Krys."

"I can't promise I'll get straight either. But if I do . . .?" And for just a moment the alcoholic clotheshorse was gone and I glimpsed the girl I once knew. "How about it, Ax? Deal?"

"Yeah. Deal. We'll work it out somehow."

"Good. I've got to go; Evan has a fit if I'm not in the audience. So he can keep an eye on me. Thanks, Ax. For being a friend."

"No charge. Hey, Krys? A minute ago you said you needed a miracle. But in a way you used to be a miracle. When you sang, you touched people. It wasn't just your voice, it was . . . hell, I don't know. But it was a gift. Maybe you shouldn't waste it."

"Some gift. Singing was never special to me, Ax. It was just a way to pay the rent."

"Then it's an even better miracle. Because it meant a lot to the people who heard you. Especially me. Anyway, think about it, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll do that. I've gotta go. Take care, Ax."

I stopped on the lawn for a minute. Didn't know why. Then I realized I was listening. Like a complete idiot. What did I expect? To hear Krystal cooking up a chorus of "Amazing Grace"?

But there I was. Standing in front of a neon sign: *Miracles! Happen!* Waiting for one. Stupid, right?

Or maybe not. Granted, most dreams never come through. The hope they offer is all we get. It's still better than nothing. And now and again, things actually do work out for the best.

A miracle? Dumb luck? Who cares?

Maybe the sign was hokey. That didn't make it wrong. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

A FINE SUMMER'S EVENING

by Beth Leydin

Beth Leydin is a pseudonym for an Australian writer of children's books. We've decided to include "A Fine Summer's Evening" in our Department of First Stories because it is the author's first work of adult fiction and her first mystery. Ms. Leydin may be new to mystery writing but she's read the mystery classics, as you'll see in her clever debut about a mystery writer honing her craft.

How would I have killed Margot?

She's dead, almost certainly. Fifty-year-old editors don't just walk out on their lives. Not female ones with grown-up children, anyway. She had nothing to run away from. Nothing to run to, as far as anyone knew.

She's been gone three weeks now. So everyone knows she is dead.

But how?

That's the question crime novelists always start with, according to Dorothy L. Sayers. "When you've got How, you've got Who," she says in *Busman's Honeymoon*. How: means and opportunity. Why: motive.

Means first.

Difficult to figure out means when you don't have a body. When the person in question (female, Caucasian, fifty, five foot three inches, one hundred and sixty pounds, dressed in a beige linen trouser suit with a brown leather briefcase, brown sandals, black handbag) just doesn't go home from work one fine summer evening.

Opportunity: just about all of Sydney.

Which leaves motive. The muddy question. Look for motive and you will find it. Everyone has someone who hates them, or who will benefit by their death. Margot was particularly rich in those. *Why* is not very helpful, really, without *how*.

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So how would I kill Margot?

You know, it wouldn't be hard.

I knew her route back from work. She'd taken to getting off the bus at Taylor Square and walking the last kilometre in an effort to stop the widening of her hips. She walked down Bourke Street—past St. Margaret's Hospital, under the cool trees and down the hill past Foveaux Street—then turned down Little Foveaux Street and onto Riley. Two blocks up and she was home in her little terrace house. Safe and sound. Every weekday she made that walk, and every weekday she passed my little terrace house where I work in the front room, sitting by the window at my computer. She would wave cheerily as she passed.

So it would have been easy for me, really. I could have just invited her in for a cup of coffee. Put sleeping pills in the sugar—she used to take two and a half sugars; she was heading for diabetes. Then—oh, I don't know . . . hit her over the head with the classic blunt instrument? Pour more sleeping tablets and half a bottle of gin down her throat (she liked gin and tonic, but I would have skipped the tonic, I think). Or laid her down on the floor and kicked her to death. Burst her spleen, broken her ribs until they pierced her lungs, finally smashed her larynx with my steel-reinforced Doc Martens until she asphyxiated on my nice polished boards, choking and gasping and shuddering her way to death.

I would have had to be careful of trace elements. But of course, the trace elements in two old terrace houses in inner-city Sydney aren't that different from each other. Our floorboards were treated with the same non-toxic stain (she got the details from me) so there would be nothing to show that she didn't die in her own home. And of course, I'd clean and polish the Docs and vacuum thoroughly (remembering to dispose of the vacuum cleaner bag in someone else's garbage—there's a skip inside the gate of St. Margaret's at the moment, they're doing some building work, that might be the best).

And even if I missed something . . . well, Margot was my editor, after all. She did stop in to visit me quite often, asking me to make just a few more changes—just a *few* more—to my manuscript. As long as there was no blood (they can track blood for months, years afterwards now), I'd be quite safe. "Yes, Sergeant, of course there's evidence she was here—she *was* here. Just not on that day."

So knives are out, because of the blood. And sleeping pills and gin might lead to vomit, which is not quite so incriminating but is definitely nasty to clean up. So I think kicking her larynx in would be the way to go.

Then I'd have to get rid of the body.

This is always the hard part, of course. It's the disposal of the

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body which usually trips up your average murderer. Difficult to do without trace.

Unless I was due to take a vacation. Unless everyone knew I was due to leave that night, to drive to the Hunter Valley and stay at Marie and Glen's magnificent guest house for a few days, do a bit of wine tasting, take a few walks along the river. And if I chose to go via the old Putty Road, which has lots of sections of bush on it which are practically deserted late at night . . . if I stopped and dragged the body out of the boot (and getting it into the boot wouldn't be so hard, because my little terrace house has rear lane access and I can drive my car right up to my back door) and tumbled it over one of the culverts and left it there in the dark and the wind for the ants and the blowflies and the crows . . .

Yes, it wouldn't be *that* hard to get rid of the body. Particularly if I'd put it in a Tuff Stuff garbage bag and then slid it *out* of the bag over the culvert, then disposed of the bag elsewhere (say in the garbage can at the back of one of the wineries—visited by scores of people every weekend; how could they tie it back to me if by some extraordinary chance they found trace evidence on it?).

Of course, I'd do all this in gloves. And wash up the cups and the sugar bowl and tip the remains of the sugar/sleeping pill mixture down the toilet and clean the toilet.

And that would show Margot that I was quite capable of thinking up a good murder plot, no matter what she said about my last story.

So really the only problem would be if someone saw her walking in my front door.

But no one did. ●

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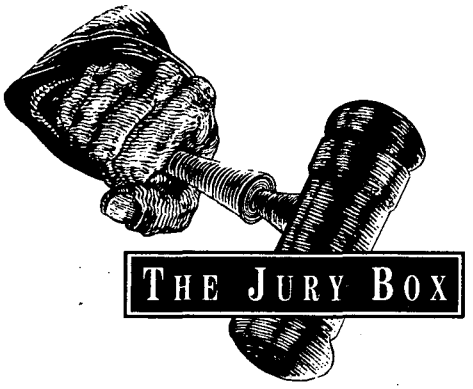

by Jon L. Breen

The last column to appear in an issue dated in the twentieth century (or in the 1900s if you prefer) provides a good opportunity to speculate on what crime and mystery fiction will be like in the early years of the next century. The six novels reviewed below are from writers who represent for good or ill the current fashions in crime fiction as we enter the dreaded New Millennium. They are the ones either 1) enjoying major commercial success; 2) receiving a hopeful push in that direction from their publishers; or 3) representative of recent trends in the genre. None of them made a debut earlier than 1990.

***** Owen Parry: *Faded Coat of Blue*, Avon, $23. For me, the best mystery trend of the '90s was the continued growth of historical mystery fiction, and the first case for Civil War Union Army Captain Abel Jones may prove to be a milestone in that subgenre. Jones is a fascinating, fully-fleshed character, admirable in his intelligence and courage though realistically subject to some of the prejudices of his time. Assigned by General George McClellan to investigate the murder of a young officer and abolition activist, Jones takes the reader on a meticulously researched and totally enthralling tour of 1860s Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, among other sites. As befits a Welsh narrator, the prose sings. This is not only one of the best historical mysteries I've ever come across but an extraordinary historical novel regardless of genre.

*** Barry Siegel: *Actual Innocence*, Ballantine, $24.95. Whether in the courtroom or out, the legal thriller achieved its peak output in the '90s and shows no signs of waning. In his second case, lawyer Greg Monarch represents his mentally unbalanced former lover Sarah Trent, condemned to death for a throat-slitting murder, in a federal *habeas corpus* action. In the process, the brave

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advocate confronts some real and fictitious concerns emblematic of our paranoid (or maybe not) time: sinister conspiracies, insidious and invisible health threats, and villainous developers. Siegel combines the familiar elements with solid competence, and one can hardly blame the author for his publisher's excessive hype.

*** Ken Bruen: *A White Arrest,* Do-Not/Dufour, $14.95. Brit Noir, in which the violence and stylized slang of American hardboiled fiction is applied to British characters and settings, is not my favorite current school of crime writing, but paradoxically Bruen *is* one of my favorite newer writers. His police team of Roberts and Brant may be the least likeable in fiction, and their search for a serial killer of English cricketers turns the reader's expectations on their heads in the *anti*-detective story manner loathed by traditionalists. But Bruen is essentially a brilliant satirist, one who offers such a wide range of British and American cultural references—books, movies, TV, music—that only the hippest mid-Atlantic reader will get them all. I loved it; you may hate it.

** Quinn Fawcett: *The Flying Scotsman,* Forge, $23.95. Here's another one I probably enjoyed more than many other readers. The vogue for book-length Holmesian pastiche, which has shown no signs of waning in the quarter of a century since Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven Percent Solution* (1974), has produced spin-off series starring Inspector Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson, and Irene Adler. Fawcett's series, of which this is the third, stars Sherlock's older, smarter, and fatter brother Mycroft—but a more active and energetic Mycroft than Conan Doyle led us to expect. (Fawcett does offer an explanation for the discrepancy.) In the service of the British government, Mycroft and cohorts try to protect a Scandinavian prince from assassination on a rail trip from London to Edinburgh. Recommended with reservations to fans of old-fashioned intrigue and especially of train mysteries. However, even with a fast-moving Mycroft and the titular high-speed locomotive, this is a snail-paced tale, about twice the length it should be.

** Janet Evanovich: *High Five,* St. Martin's, $23.95. Many current novels can be described as lightly plotted detective stories straddling the tough and cozy extremes with a wryly funny female narrator, often but not always a private eye. In her fifth case, New Jersey bounty hunter Stephanie Plum looks into the disappearance of her Uncle Fred and encounters a gallery of characters almost as weird and wacky as her family. There are a few laughs here, but the plot is thin and uninteresting and the old stalked-by-escaped-or-released-enemy bit is a very tired subplot. A mystery novel should focus on the

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mystery, not go off on six different tangents to avoid it, and it should resemble a sitcom or a slapstick two-reeler only if it's funny enough. Few are.

** Keith Ablow: *Projection,* Pantheon, $24. And how about our continuing fascination with the sick minds of multiple murderers? Psychiatrist Frank Clevenger, himself messed up enough to resort to methadone and heroin to keep going, tries to thwart maniacal plastic surgeon Trevor Lucas, an accused serial killer, who is holding hostages in a mental-hospital takeover. Ablow has enough narrative gift to keep you reading, but his second novel reflects more than anything how brilliant writers like Thomas Harris and James Ellroy suffer at the hands of their imitators. There's nothing wrong with a good gross-out, but if the story is as simplistic and unbelievable as this one, it can only be recommended to those who relish explicit and gratuitous gore for its own sake.

On a happier note, century's end is also a good time to celebrate one of the great figures in the history of the mystery genre and of this magazine, William A. P. White, better known under his pseudonym Anthony Boucher. Of all the writers who have contributed to both mystery and science fiction, including such names as Fredric Brown, Poul Anderson, Isaac Asimov, Richard A. Lupoff, Jack Vance, Ron Goulart, and Kate Wilhelm, no one has achieved icon status in both fields to the extent Boucher did. In the mystery world, his achievements as novelist, short-story writer, anthologist, and longtime critic for both the *New York Times* and *EQMM* led to the posthumous honor of having the first and greatest mystery convention (Bouchercon) named after him. The major achievement of his parallel career as a short-story writer and reviewer in the s.f. arena was as founding editor of the landmark (and still published) *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* originally a Mercury Publications stablemate of *EQMM.*

In 1983, editors Francis M. Nevins, Jr., and Martin H. Greenberg collected Boucher's best mystery stories in *Exeunt Murderers* (Southern Illinois University Press), which also includes a useful checklist of his fiction. Now comes *The Compleat Boucher: The Complete Short Science Fiction and Fantasy of Anthony Boucher* (NESFA Press, P.O. Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701; $25), edited by James A. Mann, a 500-plus-page volume of interest to mystery fans for its inclusion of five fantastic cases for Fergus O'Breen, the crossover private eye who solved mundane mysteries in three of Boucher's novels. Two of the stories, "The Chronokinesis of Jonathan Hull" (which knocked me out at age 12 and is still pretty interesting) and "Gandolphus," have not appeared in any of the earlier Boucher collections.

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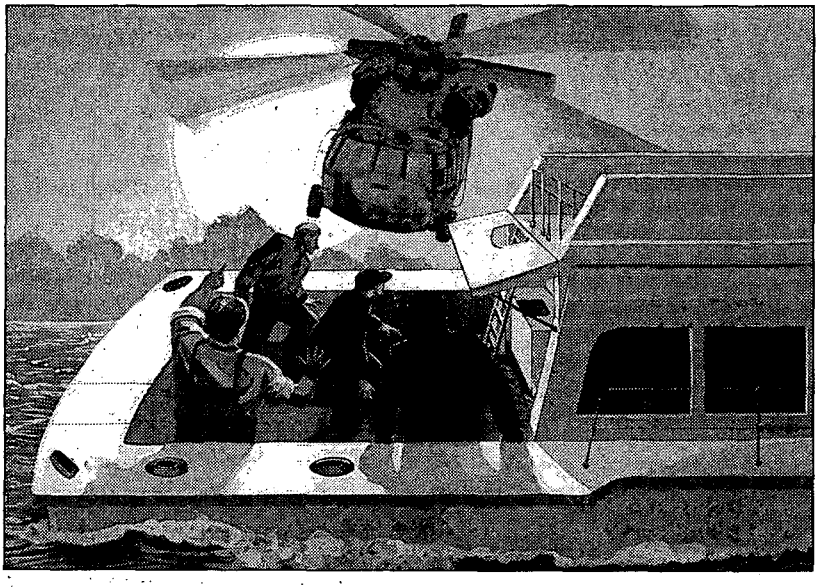

Art by Mark Evans

THE GLOBAL MAN

by Clark Howard

Pete Garth was slumped down in a canvas folding chair on the deck of his cabin cruiser, eating fresh blueberries he had just bought from a mestizo kid on the San Junto dock. It was late in the afternoon and some nimbostratus clouds were drifting down the coast from Costa Rica, threatening rain. Garth had been in port all day, as had half of the dozen or so other fishing boats that made a scant living out of San Junto. The blueberries he ate were still warm inside from the sun, picked by the boy earlier in the day where they grew wild along the edge of the banana plantations in the inland valley. Seldom did a day pass that Garth did not buy something from one of the raggedy kids who bicycled in from the valley with berries, oranges, onions, or tomatoes, which grew wild, or corn, beans, or sugar cane, which they stole from the fields. It was illegal to buy such goods on the street, but nobody cared; even the *policia* could be seen making purchases.

It was while Garth was enjoying the juicy berries that the fleshy man in the cowboy hat came down the pier and stopped at his boat. "Afternoon," the man said. "Boat for hire tomorrow?"

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"You bet," said Garth. "What are you looking for?"

"Marlin, maybe some sword. We're not particular. Know any good spots?"

"The whole ocean's a good spot," said Garth. "It's pretty much up to the fish. How many in your party?"

"Four of us. Mind if I step aboard?"

"Come ahead." Garth rose as the fleshy man stepped over onto the deck.

"Sam Farrell, down from Dallas," he said.

"Pete Garth." They shook hands and Farrell pulled out his wallet.

"How much for the day?"

Here's an action/adventure tale that will have readers clamoring for a sequel! When ex-military man Peter Garth runs into trouble in Central America, billionaire Maxwell Bodine bails him out—but at a price: service as Bodine's undercover troubleshooter. First assignment: prevent a terrorist hit on a noted athlete. If you like the tale you'll be glad to know that Crippen & Landru has a Howard collection among upcoming titles.

"One-eighty, U. S. I furnish the fuel and bait. Leave at six, back in at four. Bring your own tackle, food, and drinks."

"Deal," said Farrell. He handed Garth four fifty-dollar bills. "Keep the extra twenty. See you in the morning."

Garth pocketed the money and watched the Texan walk off up the pier. Then he finished eating the blueberries, locked the door of the cabin, and left the boat. At the end of the pier was a narrow cobblestone street which he turned into and walked to the San Junto town square. He found little activity there: a few merchants standing outside shops, some old *mestizo* women in black shawls picking among various pushcarts, some flatbed trucks from the banana plantations parked here and there, some old men in a little patch of public park waiting for the rain to force them home; everything lazy, unhurried.

Crossing the square, Garth went into the dim coolness of Our Lady of the Angels church, put one finger in the holy-water font and made the sign of the cross, then walked down a side aisle, genuflected, and knelt in a pew next to the candle altar. He said a prayer for his dead wife and his dead little daughter, making the usual effort, as he did so, to keep his mind free of accusatory thoughts about a god who could allow them to die as horribly as they did. Keeping his good prayers brief in order to check his bad thoughts, he then left the pew, stepped over to the altar and lighted candles for his lost wife and child, and put one of Sam Farrell's fifty-dollar bills in the offertory box.

Leaving the church, Garth crossed the square again and went

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into the local bottle shop where, settling his account and picking up three bottles of Bombay gin, he parted with another of Sam Farrell's fifties. He walked back to the boat and had just made his berth at the pier when a drizzle of rain began; he grabbed his canvas chair from the deck and got down into the cabin seconds before the drizzle became a downpour. A bottle of the Bombay at his side, he settled into his big reclining captain's chair, got some soft Aruban folk music on the shortwave, and began to drink.

In an hour, he knew, the hellish memories would be gone, and he would get through one more night.

Just before six the next morning, with the sun already up and the wet pier beginning to dry, an old pickup truck parked next to Garth's boat and three men got out. Two of them lugged a coffin-shaped wooden locker box on board and set it up against the outer bulkhead of the cabin. The third man stepped over to meet Garth as he came up out of the cabin.

"Buddy Leeds," he said, offering his hand. "Sam won't be joining us today; he's sick from some shellfish he ate last night. Said we should just go on without him." He gestured toward his companions. "Max Volz and Lew Miller."

Garth shook hands and bobbed his chin at the locker box. "What's in that?"

"Tackle, extra line, grub, ice chest with beer." Leeds looked at his watch. "Can we shove off now?"

"Yeah, I guess so," said Garth. He whistled at a bait monger on the pier and the man hurried over with a large bucket of iced chub fish, for which Garth paid in local currency. With the bait on deck, he cast off his fore and aft lines, fired up the onboard engine, and slowly reversed out of his berth. In minutes, he had eased the boat around and was cruising past breaker water to a quiet morning ocean. When they were a mile out, Buddy Leeds came into the cabin.

"How 'bout taking us down the coast to Lobos Bay?" he asked congenially.

Garth shook his head. "I don't fish Lobos. Too much reef. Anyway, we need open water for marlin and sword—"

Leeds drew an automatic pistol from under his shirt and held it casually at his side. "Lobos Bay," he repeated. "Set the course."

Pete Garth sighed quietly and navigated forty degrees to port. "Am I going to be told what's going on?" he asked.

"Just steer the boat," Leeds drawled.

"Right," said Garth.

It took twenty minutes to get down-coast and inward to Lobos Bay. Garth guided the boat very slowly in until he could see coral

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tip ahead of him in the still, limpid water. Reversing the engine, he held the craft steady.

"I can't get any closer without going aground on the coral."

"Okay, we don't want you to tear up your boat," Leeds said agreeably. "Cut the engine and drop anchor."

As Garth steadied the boat and turned off the power, he saw out the forward window that a large inflatable was being launched from shore with four men in it. He watched as an outboard motor was tilted into the water and started up to speed them toward Garth's boat. Before they got halfway there, however, Garth's attention was caught by something else: From the jungle behind them, a helicopter spun out over the beach and bore down on them.

The man named Max Volz leaned into the cabin and yelled, "Buddy, it's a military chopper!"

"Break out some firepower and shoot it down!" Leeds ordered. He looked at Garth. "Don't do anything stupid, okay? Just stay put."

"Whatever you say," Garth replied.

Leeds hurried onto the deck. Garth watched through the open cabin door as Volz and the third man, Lew Miller, opened the big wooden box they had brought on board and each quickly assembled a laser-guided rocket launcher. Loading, both men knelt and took aim on the hovering helicopter. The pilot must have seen the deadly weapons being aimed, because the helicopter suddenly dipped to one side and began to swing away. But the evasive action was too late: Both launchers were fired, one shell taking off the tail stabilizer, the other exploding against the aircraft's underbelly and blowing it apart.

Garth watched in shock as pieces of the helicopter rose in a mushroom of fiery debris and then fell into the ocean. At the same time, he saw three military gunboats cutting in full-speed from the mouth of the bay, and on shore several dozen brown-uniformed men rushing out of the jungle to spray automatic-weapons fire at the men in the inflatable. In seconds, the inflatable was ripped to shreds and the men were floating in bloody bay water.

On Garth's boat, Volz and Miller were reloading the launchers to fire on the gunboats, but the military craft were too fast, too maneuverable; they sped past in single file, raking the boat's deck with a steady pattern of fire that tore up everything in its path, including all three of the men who had commandeered Garth's boat.

When the gunfire ceased, Garth peeled off a pillowcase to use as a white flag, and waved it over his head as he moved warily onto deck. One of the military boats was secured alongside with grappling hooks, and a dozen soldiers scrambled aboard. One of them,

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ignoring Garth's raised hands and white flag, strode up and butt-stroked him in the face with his rifle. Garth dropped to the deck, unconscious.

A week later, one side of his face still swollen grotesquely from the rifle blow, Pete Garth stood before a three-man military court and heard himself pronounced guilty of insurrection. "Are you ready for sentencing?" the senior officer asked.

"No, I am not!" Garth forced words out of the unswollen side of his lips. "I'll tell you again that I am innocent. I had nothing to do with smuggling those weapons. I didn't even know those men!"

"Señor Garth," the officer said patiently, "you are a foreigner in this country. You are a former military officer in your own country and, as such, are familiar with military weapons. You were photographed by our military intelligence being given money by a known mercenary-for-hire who is a notorious arms smuggler. You have presented no evidence of innocence other than your own word. A three-man helicopter crew was killed because you and your confederates were attempting to overthrow the government of this country. This tribunal has found you guilty of that offense, and for that you are hereby sentenced to be executed by firing squad one week from today." The judge nodded curtly to a military guard detail. "Remove the prisoner."

Several days later, Garth stood at the door of his cell in San Dismas military prison, talking through the bars to a neatly dressed young man from the United States consulate.

"Mr. Garth," the young man patiently explained, "the United States has no embassy in this small country; it has only a consulate. The business of that consulate is to protect the *commercial* interests of U.S. citizens who live or travel here. We have no authority to intercede in *criminal* matters. We obtained permission from the State Department to retain a local attorney for you, which we did. But you've been found guilty; you've been sentenced; there is no appeals process on a conviction of insurrection. What you don't seem to understand is that there's nothing further we can do."

"What *you* don't seem to understand," Garth said sharply, "is that day after tomorrow I'm going to be put in front of a firing squad and shot! I'm an American citizen! I file a U. S. tax return every year on what I earn down here! I'm a Marine Corps veteran! How in hell can the United States government turn its back on me like this!"

"The government hasn't turned its back on you. We've filed a formal plea for executive clemency."

"Do you think it'll be granted?" The consulate aide looked away.

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The knuckles of Garth's hands, gripping the bars, turned white. "You're telling me it's hopeless, right?"

"It looks that way," the young diplomat admitted. "I'm sorry, Mr. Garth." He walked quickly away, not looking back.

Garth dropped down on the end of his bunk and stared bleakly at the wall.

Well after twelve that night, in the middle of a violent rainstorm, Garth awoke from a fitful sleep to the sound of his cell door being unlocked. He was ordered to dress and taken by a guard detail to the administration wing of the prison. There, he was given a hooded rain poncho and told by a young captain, "Put this on. Do exactly as you're told. Ask no questions."

Escorted outside to a rainswept driveway, he was put in the rear seat of a military sedan, next to a high-ranking officer who sat silently smoking a large cigar. The young captain sat next to the driver, turned in his seat in order to keep a pistol pointed at Garth.

"Guiar," the man next to Garth said, and the sedan pulled away.

For an hour they drove north along the coastal highway, going around and past San Junto. Garth wondered in passing what had happened to his boat, then resumed wondering what was happening to *him*. Some kind of trade, maybe? Releasing someone in an American prison in exchange for him? He knew that things like that were done; he also knew that such deals usually involved persons of some political importance, not just a fishing-boat owner who had run away from a previous life in the wake of a personal tragedy. No, he decided, this isn't a diplomatic trade.

When the car finally turned off the highway, it was at an air base that Garth had heard was up the coast somewhere but had never seen. One look at the man next to Garth and the car was passed quickly, with smart salutes, through the entry gate. Across a shiny wet tarmac the car drove, to a far corner at the end of a very long landing strip where there was parked, in a ring of spotlights, a gleaming white Boeing 747 with no visible markings except a circle of five golden stars on its tail fin. The car halted next to a ramp of boarding stairs at the plane's rear hatch.

"Go aboard the plane," the captain with the pistol ordered. "Do not try to escape or I will shoot you. Go."

Garth got out into the pouring rain and carefully climbed the slippery stairs. As he got to the top, the hatch of the plane opened and a steward, Polynesian-looking, dressed in starched white, greeted him. "Come in, sir. Let me take your wet garment." Then: "Follow me, please."

Garth was led through a splendidly appointed aircraft, its com-

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partments, he saw through open doors, configured into a galley, dining alcove, bedrooms, communications section, what looked like a library-study-screening room, a small lounge area with bar, and finally, in the two-level forward section, the private office and living quarters of the plane's owner.

Ushered into the office, Garth faced a man of seventy with a long, furrowed face, steady, shrewd eyes, and a lip line that looked as if it had been chiseled from granite. "Sit down, Mr. Garth," he said in a voice that somehow sounded metallic. "Do you know who I am?"

"General Maxwell Bodine," Garth replied quietly.

"Tell me what you know about me."

Garth shrugged. "Same thing everybody else knows, I guess. Just what's been in the news for years." He felt distinctly uncomfortable being, as he was, in the presence of a living legend.

"Elaborate for me," the general said.

Garth cleared his throat. "Well, uh—sir, I know that you were once chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and that you resigned because of some political difference with the President. I know that since then you've become a multi-millionaire with interests all over the world. I know that you live aboard this plane and that nobody's seen you for years. I read that you had an affair twenty-five years ago with a member of the British royal family that produced a daughter who is always making headlines that you don't like but can't seem to do anything about. And," he hesitated and looked away.

"Go on," the general prompted.

"And a lot of people say you're crazy. Genuinely crazy."

The general laughed, quietly and briefly. "Pretty fair description," he allowed. The steward entered, served coffee, and left. "Let me correct several points," the general said. "The difference I had with the President, may he rest in peace, was personal, not political. He gave me a secret order which I found myself ethically unable to carry out, so I resigned. I have since become not a multi-millionaire, but a multi-*billionaire.* I do live aboard this plane a good deal of the time, but I also have a private island in the South Pacific, which is my home base. Not many people have seen me for the past two and a half decades because I choose to stay out of the public eye. As for being crazy—well, who knows? Aren't we all a little crazy in one way or another? Have I left anything out?"

"Just your daughter, sir."

Grunting softly, sipping his coffee, and pointedly ignoring Garth's reply, the general placed an inch-thick Manila folder on his desk. "This," he said, "is you. Peter Michael Garth. Everything from a family history going back three generations to how difficult your birth was for your mother, how much your father drank, your

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grades from kindergarten through high school, the batting average that got you a baseball scholarship to college, the affair with the professor's wife that caused you to leave school and enlist in the Marine Corps, the battlefield commission you won in Desert Storm, your subsequent antiterrorist and military intelligence training, your eventual duty in Lebanon where you fell in love with a beautiful young woman named Jubayl, whose background was Syrian Catholic. The relationship was opposed by her family because you were neither Arab, Syrian, or Catholic. When she became pregnant, however, and after your conversion to Catholicism, a marriage was allowed, which produced your daughter, Jazzine. Tragically, both were killed when terrorists bombed the Bekkah military apartment building in Beirut. You were immediately transferred back to the U. S., where you resigned your commission and dropped out of sight. No one heard any more about you until you were arrested down here, convicted of insurrection, and sentenced to death."

"Does your file tell you that I'm innocent of that charge?" Garth inquired evenly.

"It tells me you *claim* to be innocent." The general shrugged. "Frankly, your guilt or innocence is immaterial to me."

"Why am I here?" Garth asked bluntly.

"I'm going to give you a chance to stay alive," the general said. "For a certain sum of money, that fellow in the car out there will bribe the warden and enough guards at San Dismas prison to fake your execution. Instead of burying you, they'll bury a coffin with two sandbags in it. Those sandbags will cost one hundred thousand dollars apiece."

Garth remained quiet for a long moment, sipping and savoring the excellent coffee, studying the man behind the desk. Finally he asked, "What do you want in return, General?"

"Your services. Whenever I want you, and for whatever I want done."

"What kind of services?"

"Troubleshooting services. The kind of stuff you learned in your Marine Corps intelligence and antiterrorist training."

"For how long?"

The general shrugged. "The rest of your life. That's what we're talking about, isn't it? Saving your life?"

"You want me to become your personal slave for the rest of my *life?*"

"Not at all. I'm not looking for a slave. What I want is a competent person of unquestioned loyalty that I can assign to handle sensitive international matters for me. You'll be handsomely paid, you'll live extremely well; you simply won't be able to resign. Officially you won't exist: You'll have no identity, no passport, no past.

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You'll be the proverbial man without a country. But you won't need a country; you'll be a global man, with the whole world to work in. When I send you somewhere to look after my interests, I'll provide you with papers—Swedish, Canadian, Swiss, whatever you need."

"Suppose I decide to skip out on you?" Garth asked.

The general shrugged again. "I would simply notify Interpol that you were traveling on counterfeit documents. Sooner or later you'd be caught and identified. Eventually you'd probably end up back in San Dismas waiting for the firing squad again. Only next time," he emphasized, "I wouldn't be here to help you."

Garth rose and stepped over to look out one of the plane's windows. The military sedan was still parked at the rear boarding stairs. "When do I have to decide?" he asked.

The general opened an ornate pocket watch and placed it on the desk before him. "I'll give you sixty seconds," he said, somehow making it sound magnanimous.

Garth locked eyes with the older man as the seconds began to tick away. His mouth suddenly felt dry. Briefly, he glanced back at the car and thought about San Dismas prison. A memory of his dead wife and daughter flared in his mind. Did it really matter whether he lived or died? He wasn't entirely certain. But one thing he did know: He did not want an ignoble death before a firing squad in a foreign country for a crime he did not commit. Wetting his lips, just as the second hand on the ornate watch passed fifty-five, he said, "It's a deal, General."

The general pressed a button on his desk control panel and the steward entered. "Carlos, show Mr. Garth to the forward bedroom and get him some clothes, food, whatever else he wants." As Garth rose, the general pressed another button. "Captain Jensen, I'd like to leave for the island as soon as we can get clearance." He pressed a third button. "Mr. Davies, please deliver the briefcase to the gentleman in the backseat of the sedan waiting outside." He was pressing still another button as Garth was led out of the office.

An hour later, the big 747 was airborne. In a bedroom on the lower deck, Garth was lying in his berth, freshly showered and shaved, in crisp new robe and pajamas, drinking a gin on the rocks, waiting for Carlos to serve him a steak dinner, and thinking: Maybe this wouldn't be too bad, after all. Maybe working for the general would give him something besides gin to help ease the memory of Jubayl and Jazzine. Instead of drinking himself to death, maybe the work would be dangerous enough to get him killed early. And decently.

Time would tell, he supposed, reaching for the gin bottle to pour himself another drink.

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The island, Ritilevu, northernmost in the Fiji Basin, had been purchased from the Fijian government two decades earlier. Inhabited at the time by a small tribe of mixed Melanesian-Polynesian people of light skin and straight hair, it occupied twenty-seven square miles of land that was, on its windward side, a dense, lush forest, and on its leeward side a broad grassland fringed by mangrove and coconut trees and belted by a beach of fine, soft sand almost pink in color. The people of the island at that time made a scant living exporting to Suva, the Fijian capital, crops of mulberries, chestnuts, and bananas, as well as modest quantities of sandalwood.

Before purchasing the island, the general met with the tribal chief, Rotuma, to explain what would happen if the island became his by land-grant purchase. A private airstrip would be constructed, as well as a mansion headquarters for the general. A complex of beach cottages would be built to house the general's employees. Traffic to and from the island would be by permit only, strictly enforced. Strangers and media representatives would be barred. Any resident, when off the island, who discussed island business, would be banished.

In return for these restrictions, the general promised to construct and support a modern hospital, elementary and high schools, a modern youth center and sports complex, and a nonprofit shopping mall. He would bring in agricultural experts and new harvesting equipment to maximize the island's crops, as well as a processing and canning factory to capitalize on their value. When the general died, all the island except the mansion complex and beach houses would cede, along with all improvements, to the original inhabitants and their heirs.

"It was a dream come true for us," Toki, the houseboy assigned to Garth, told him as he helped the newcomer settle in. Garth was housed in a modern, comfortable cottage facing the ocean. "Everyone here is indebted to the general in some way. Marcel, the head chef, was rescued by him from a Vietminh prison after his capture when the French withdrew from Indochina. Juan and Maria Gallardo, who oversee the mansion's housekeeping and grounds, once lived in poverty, struggling to survive with seven children in the *barrio* of Barcelona; now their seven children are being educated in the finest boarding schools and universities in Europe. And Colonel Drew Burton, a former Royal Guard officer who killed his unfaithful wife and her lover, is a free man today, and in charge of island security, because the general financed his defense and helped him win an acquittal. Even I myself, once a poor field laborer, will be going to the University of Hawaii in two years to study oceanography, when I complete my preparatory studies."

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"What happens to all these people when the general dies?" Garth asked cynically.

"There is a trust in the care of a Swedish national bank that provides for everyone employed by the general," Toki replied. "But even if there were not, the people who serve the general would never leave him. He is the kind of man for whom one develops deep affection and loyalty. You will see; it will happen to you."

Garth doubted it. He was grateful to be alive, but he resented having to indenture himself for the rest of his life for the privilege. Someday, somehow, he was certain he would find a way to get out from under the general's dominion. In the meantime, he decided, there was no reason not to enjoy the amenities of Ritilevu.

For several weeks, Garth spent his days leisurely fishing off the main pier, or exploring on foot the fecund forest, or driving around the island in the Jeep provided at each cottage, or on some days scuba diving with Toki in the exquisite coral world off one end of the beach. Evenings he spent in the complex's big social hall; or at the mansion club where the general's pilots, security chief, secretaries, and other top aides gathered; or in solitude, reading, drinking, watching international satellite television in his cottage. Meals were taken in a large, open-air dining hall on a hill overlooking the ocean, prepared and served by islanders who had been sent to Paris for training. Many were multilingual, while others, particularly those who remained in island agriculture, by choice kept to their traditional Fijian dialect.

One day, when Garth had walked far around the edge of the island, he came upon a small, isolated cove where he found a young woman sitting on a bark mat back from the water's edge, stringing colorful beads from several large hulls in front of her.

"Hello," Garth said. Her flawless tawny skin brought to his mind a flash memory of Jubayl. She looked up and smiled, but did not speak. Garth sat on the ground beside the mat. "What's your name?"

She frowned.

Garth pointed to himself. "Me Pete." And pointed to her. "You?"

When she frowned again, he repeated the routine. And repeated it again.

"Ah," she finally replied. "You Pete. Me Marita." She pointed in the direction from which he had come. "You workee general?"

"Yes," he said, smiling. "Yes, me workee general. Me big chief for general." She looked properly impressed. Garth's eyes swept the curves of the *pareau* that was wrapped around her body and tucked into its cleavage to hold. He had not been stirred by a woman's body in a long time, but this one's body could have stirred a monolith. "Makee nice beads," he said, pointing. He took one of her hands and felt its smoothness.

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"Makee beads for harvest festival," she said. Garth knew that the island was preparing to harvest bananas.

"You no workee banana fields?" he asked. Her hands were too smooth.

"No," Marita replied with a resplendent smile. "I no workee banana fields. I workee Radcliffe College. That's in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I workee for my degree. Me art major. And for your information, the general is my godfather, and I am the youngest daughter of Rotuma, the tribal chief of this island."

Garth could feel his face become as red as some of the beads she was stringing; all he could do was stare down at the grass between his feet. Marita continued to smile at him, not maliciously but more in amusement. Gently withdrawing her hand, she resumed stringing beads. When Garth was able to marshal the courage to do so, he looked at her again and asked, "How does one go about committing suicide on Ritilevu?"

"I'm sorry," she said contritely. "That was awful of me, wasn't it? But I couldn't resist. Here," she finished knotting a necklace and slipped it over his head, "this is a peace offering for being mean."

"I'm really sorry," he apologized also. "I shouldn't have come on to you like that."

"And I shouldn't have teased you like that. Let's start over." She offered her hand again. "Friends?"

"Yes. Friends. Thanks," Garth said, taking her hand.

While they held hands, both began to laugh over the incident. They held hands longer than they had to.

Marita let Garth escort her to the harvest festival and there he met for the first time her father, Chief Rotuma, a man of considerable presence, not unlike the general himself. In the week that followed, before Marita had to return to school, she and Garth swam in the lagoon, scuba dived, picnicked in the forest, and at the recreation center Marita taught him some new dance steps he had never even heard of. They frequently held hands, kissed when they felt the impulse, and became overly passionate a few times, but seemed to have a mutual reluctance to go beyond lusty groping on such short acquaintance. There was definitely an intense attraction between them, but neither seemed certain exactly what to do about it.

When Marita's holiday ended, Garth rode with her on the general's launch to Suva, the Fiji capital, then by limo to Nandi International Airport. A growing depression came over both of them when they parted at the boarding gate, and Garth was utterly despondent as he made a lonely trip back to Ritilevu. He was soon given something else to occupy his mind, however.

When he walked into his cottage, Garth found a Manila enve-

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lope on the coffee table. As he picked it up, the cottage telephone rang. Answering it, he heard the general's odd metallic voice say, "Please open the envelope, Mr. Garth, and put its contents in a stack in front of you."

Garth did so. On the top of the stack was a glossy photograph of a superbly built boxer. "Recognize him?" the general asked.

"Yes. Ali Royale, the heavyweight champion."

"Correct. Ali Royale. Former name, before he joined the Muslim religion, was Marcus Marshall. A black American by birth, he has been the undefeated heavyweight champion for a dozen years. Now thirty-three years old, he is beginning to slow down. Go to the next item in the stack, please."

Putting the photo of Ali Royale aside, Garth found a second glossy.

"Dov Danielov, a native-born Israeli," said the general. "Number one contender for Royale's title, ten years younger, also undefeated, former Olympic gold medal champion. Next item."

It was a photo of a large poster announcing a heavyweight championship fight between the two men.

"Royale defends his title against Danielov five nights from now at the opening of the new Fountainbleau Sports Arena in Paris. Next item."

It was an architect's rendering of a fabulous, ultra-modern, domed sports arena. "The Fountainbleau," said the general, "is the newest, most elaborate sports arena in the world. It is large enough, and its design flexible enough, to accommodate any competitive sport being played. It is owned by General Enterprises of Europe. General Enterprises of Europe is owned by me. Next item."

It was a newspaper clipping containing photographs of three men and a woman. "Four members of the Black July terrorist group. Several months ago they were captured while in the act of arming a massive bomb in the sewer under Lod International Airport in Tel Aviv. They were tried by the government of Israel and sentenced to life in prison. Next item."

It was a neatly typed letter from the Black July group. "They are demanding that I secure the release of their imprisoned comrades. They say that I have the money and the influence to do so. If I do not do it, they threaten that Dov Danielov will not leave the ring alive on the night of the title fight, causing the new Fountainbleau Arena to have a permanent taint on it. And they will make this letter public after the assassination to tell the world that I was partly responsible for it."

"Is there any way you can get the four people released?" Garth asked.

"None whatever. Israel does not bargain with terrorists, ever.

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They would not make an exception even to save the life of a beloved national sports champion. What do you make of the letter?"

Quickly rereading it, Garth said, "They specifically state that Danielov will not leave the ring alive. They're going to try and kill him after the fight starts."

"Precisely. What else?"

"They aren't threatening to blow up the arena or anything like that. Apparently they feel that a single dramatic killing of a world-famous Israeli athlete will have more impact than the mass murder caused by another bomb."

"What does that suggest to you?"

"A sniper."

"Exactly. Now then, you had sniper and counter-sniper training in the Marine Corps. You should be able to pick out the likely places in the arena where a sniper might nest. The Black July people are extremely dangerous, but my intelligence indicates that none of them are experienced shooters. You are. I want you to find the sniper and take him out. Any questions?"

"No, sir." Garth felt his adrenalin rushing. A compelling surge of energy began building inside of him. This was action, it was combat, it was *real.* He had a sense of coming alive as a warrior again.

"I have several eight-passenger Lear jets at the airfield where I keep the 747," the general said. "One of them will be ready in an hour to take you to Paris via Bogota and Dakar. You'll be traveling as a Swiss sports writer covering the fight. Money, a wardrobe, passport, and a cover story will be on board for you. In Paris, you'll be met by Marcel Savoie, director of security at the arena. He is aware of the problem and will cooperate fully with you. He will also provide you with any weapons you require. Now, there's one more item in that stack I want you to look at."

Garth put the letter aside and found a news clipping from a Monte Carlo tabloid. There was a nightclub photo of the general's daughter, Brenda, in a very low-cut gown, barefoot, doing some kind of wild dance with a slick-looking Latin type.

"Since you'll be in France anyway," the general said, "stop in Monte Carlo and bring her home."

"Suppose she doesn't want to come?" Garth asked.

"I didn't tell you to give her a choice," the general replied curtly.

He hung up.

Marcel Savoie met Garth when the Lear set down on the private field of Orly Airport. A board-straight, unsmiling man with a pencil moustache and dangerous eyes, he did not offer to shake hands, and in silence drove Garth into Paris in the general's own

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bulletproof Renault. Garth ignored the man's obvious resentment and moved immediately to business.

"How many people know about this threat on Dov Danielov's life?" he asked.

"Only three: the general, myself, and you," replied Savoie.

"Good. Let's keep it that way. I'd like a clearance pass for the entire arena. You can tell your security force that I'm writing an article on the new venue as well as the fight. And I want a tour of the entire place as soon as we get there."

Garth was not prepared for what the tour presented. The Fountainbleau was a vast, circular coliseum with six thousand tubular seats tiered from an immense stadium floor to the enormous retractable transparent dome. Just under the dome was a sprawling web of catwalks giving access to a network of lighting and projection booths. Inclined accesses led to outer corridors which led to other inclines down to the entry gates and ticket booths. Concession stands lined the corridors. Doors off the corridors led to public restrooms, janitorial closets, maintenance lockers, a power plant, and communications terminals.

"This place is a nightmare," Garth said. "It has more places to nest a sniper than a jungle—and just as many places to assemble and conceal a rifle. Our best hope is to try and keep the weapon *out*. Are there metal detectors at every gate?"

"Of course," Savoie replied aloofly. "The best, most sensitive available. I selected them myself."

"How many incline ramps are there leading to the spectator sections?"

"Sixteen."

"Okay, hire sixty-four additional armed personnel—new people, not on the staff already—and put four at the bottom of each ramp with hand-held detectors. Scan everybody a second time *after* they get past the gate. How many catwalk booths are there?"

"Eight electrical, four projection."

"Put an armed security guard in each one. Also, I want fifty armed men and women in civilian clothes to mingle with the spectators on the bottom and top levels of seats; if there's a shot, it'll come from one or the other."

"I presume you are convinced that it will be a bullet and not an explosive," Savoie said.

"Yes. From the tone of the letter. It's a specific kill."

Savoie nodded curtly. "I must agree. What next?"

"The dome," said Garth. "Would a max charge armor-piercing slug get through it?"

"Not with any degree of accuracy." Savoie shook his head. "It would deflect badly."

"Okay." Lips pursed intently, Garth paced around the main

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level for several minutes, eyes scanning, searching, studying, seeking. "Okay," he then said again. "What's under us?"

Savoie smiled, barely. "Something I guarantee you have never seen before, *monsieur*. Come."

The reserved security chief led Garth to a bi-level subterranean area where multiple surfaces for the rotunda floor were stored. "The polished wooden floor which you saw upstairs is now directly above us," he said. "It is fully retractable and is for use in basketball, volleyball, gymnastics, indoor track, and other hard-court competitions. Now, from this room," he indicated a deep, cavernous room that appeared to be stacked with large squares of turf, "we can automatically raise and draw out a twelve-inch layer of earth, over which we can pull a blanket of artificial grass, and *voilà!* we have in the auditorium a splendid field suitable for soccer, rugby, baseball, football, cricket, or any other open-field sport. And over here," he led Garth to the center of the sub-level, "we have a permanent ring for boxing and wrestling, as well as a full revolving stage for concerts and other non-sporting events, plus additional deluxe seating when the big field is not in use. A touch of a button retracts the wooden floor and raises the ring or stage with the additional seating area. Brilliant, *oui?*"

"Eighth wonder of the world," Garth allowed. "Show me the generator room."

"Down another level," Savoie said. "Do you think they may try to sabotage our electricity?"

"I would. Assume they somehow get a weapon inside: a collapsible-stock rifle with an infrared sniperscope on it. The lights go out. Danielov would be a sitting duck for a single shot, even by a poor shooter. And in the noise, confusion, and darkness, the shooter could blend into the crowd and escape." Garth scrutinized the electrical plant and studied the sequencing power. "Okay, three armed guards, two inside, one outside. And I want all auxiliary generators turned up and running fifteen minutes before the fighters enter the auditorium—and *kept* running, just in case these lunatics find a way to knock out the main power source *externally.*"

Savoie stared thoughtfully at Garth for a long moment, then, for the first time, extended a hand of friendship. "Forgive me. I had reservations about you. But I see that the general, as usual, knew what he was doing. I would not have thought of keeping the generators running. Thank you for the assistance."

"Thank you for the handshake," Garth replied. "I'm sure we can learn from each other."

On that more agreeable note, they continued their inspection of the new arena.

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On the night of the fight, as tens of thousands of Parisians, as well as people from all over the world, flooded into the magnificent new Fountainbleau, Pete Garth and Marcel Savoie separately prowled the huge arena like hungry predators, carrying palm-size communications units, checking security posts as they went, scrutinizing everything and everybody in the almost electrically-charged atmosphere created by the combined grand opening and international heavyweight championship match. When they met, fifteen minutes before the fight was to begin, it was with mutual dejection.

"Anything?" Garth asked.

Savoie shrugged. "Nothing. You?"

Garth shook his head.

As they spoke, there was a loud drum roll, the arena dimmed, and a master of ceremonies stepped into a brilliant spotlight in the center of the rotunda.

"Mesdames et monsieurs! Ladies and gentlemen!" he announced. "The Fountainbleau will now unveil to this esteemed international audience the world's first and only permanent prizefighting ring!"

As the crowd watched in awe, the floor slid back and a resplendent, multi-colored, chrome-posted, silk-roped ring rose from the sub-level. A ripple of astonishment quickly evolved into a roaring clamor of approval as the audience rose in waves to cheer.

Leaning close to Garth's ear, Savoie said, "The fighters will be coming in now."

Garth, watching the ring lock into place, frowned. "Okay, let's circulate some more."

They parted, moving in opposite directions along the top tier of seating just under the dome level. Far below them, the Israeli national anthem began to play as challenger Dov Danielov and his entourage made their way down a long aisle to the ring. Garth paused, still frowning, looking down at the scene, his mind racing in numerous tributaries of thought as it sought out something, he knew not what, to lock onto. What was his instinct trying to tell him? He walked on, wondering.

Below, Danielov entered the ring and danced around for the crowd. Almost immediately then, the national anthem of the United States began to play as Ali Royale and his retinue jogged down another aisle toward the ring. And it was on the ring that Garth's attention now riveted as he paused once again to look down. That was when his roiling mind finally centered on a single thought. *The newspaper clipping*—in the packet of material the general had sent him.

Garth's eyes widened and his body tensed. The Black July ter-

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rorist attempt on the Tel Aviv airport had come from the sewer—from *below* the target.

Like a released coil, Garth sprang to the nearest exit ramp and began a full-speed run down from the top tier. The only place he and Savoie had not checked was the hydraulic lifting area under the ring, the mechanism that raised it to spectator level.

Now, as Garth ran, he could hear the crowd cheering as Royale reached the ring and climbed the four steps to the ropes. Several times, Garth's forward momentum almost caused him to spin out of control as he rounded corners at each level. As he ran, he tried to contact Savoie on his palm set, but because of the crowd noise he could not detect a reply. He had started on the eighth level up, and now, passing four, he threw a quick glance down and saw that the ring was crowded with dignitaries being introduced. *Good,* his rampant mind was able to reason, *the more people, the worse the target. The shooter would probably wait until the fight was ready to begin—with only the fighters and referee in the hit zone.*

On two, Garth was halted by a pair of security guards. He quickly showed them the pass under his coat and said, "Contact Savoie! Tell him I said under the ring!" Then he was running again, collecting a third guard at the maintenance stairs entrance, drawing from a belt holster the Sig Pro .40-caliber automatic he had been given by Savoie, then abruptly stopping both himself and the guard on sub-level one. Gesturing for the guard to wait, touching his lips for quiet, he quickly removed his shoes and slowly, silently, opened a door leading to sub-level two. He gestured again, having the guard remain and secure the door. Then, without shoes, he silently descended the cement steps.

Has to be it, his mind said. *Perfect sniper nest—cut Danielov to pieces with an automatic weapon of some kind—through the wooden floor and padded canvas—as he waits for the opening bell—*

Suddenly Garth was there, around the corner of a wall in the area where the retracted ring was stored when not in use, peering around. And there, kneeling in a recess near the huge hydraulic lift, was a young man in an ordinary business suit, an Uzi machine gun aimed upward, his wide eyes fixed on an under corner of the ring a dozen feet above him.

One shot, Garth thought, *one perfect shot—*

That, he knew, was all he would have. The shooter's finger was on his weapon's trigger; the least pressure would send a spray, albeit brief, of deadly fire through the ring floor.

From above, Garth heard a loud-speakered voice say, "And now for referee Franklin Tucker's final instructions to the fighters!"

There were sounds of fighters and corner men walking from two corners to the center of the ring, and in seconds, Garth knew, they

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would return to those respective corners, and everyone in each corner would leave the ring except the fighters.

One shot, one perfect shot—

At the sound of feet moving away from ring center, Garth eased the safety off the automatic and stepped silently around the corner just as the terrorist was raising his Uzi.

One perfect shot—

Garth leveled the Sig with both hands and fired.

The .40-caliber slug struck the terrorist dead-center in his right temple, killing him instantly as the Uzi dropped unfired to the floor.

Above Garth, in the ring, the bell sounded, beginning round one.

In the private section of Orly airport, where they stood in the evening twilight watching the general's Lear being towed out of its hangar, Marcel Savoie said to Garth, "I want to apologize again for my initial behavior, Pete. It has been a distinct honor working with someone of your professionalism. I hope to enjoy the pleasure again someday."

"And I," said Garth. "Incidentally, Marcel, you could do me a great favor by keeping an eye out, through your contacts, for a man named Sam Farrell. He's a mercenary/arms dealer type. I badly need to find and talk to him."

"I'll put the word out at once," Savoie said.

They shook hands warmly and Garth boarded the Lear. During the short flight to Nice, as he was changing into a white dinner jacket and bow tie, the copilot came out of the cockpit and said, "Brenda Bodine has been located at the Residence de la Javie on the beach. A limo and driver will be waiting to take you to Monte Carlo."

It was a short twenty-five-kilometer drive up the coast, and Garth could see the night lights of the gem of the French Riviera long before they got there. At the Javie, he shook hands with the concierge, passing him a hundred-dollar bill, and said candidly, "Brenda Bodine's father sent me to bring her home. Where might I find her?"

Glancing at his watch, the concierge replied, "At this time of night, she can usually be found at the Esquinada. That's a casino and nightclub for wealthy misfits. I certainly hope you have more luck than the other two."

"The other two?"

"Yes. You're the third one her father has sent to retrieve her. She pushed the first one into the harbor; he nearly drowned. The second one she had arrested; claimed he had fondled her in an elevator. He served thirty days for it."

"Nice lady," Garth said.

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"I'd put her roughly in the same class as Lucrezia Borgia," the concierge commented.

Garth had his driver take him to the Esquinada, where he found a seat at the bar and nursed a drink as he reconnoitered the place. It was crowded, noisy, smoky, filled to the walls with the frivolous rich. Brenda was in the center of the activity: drinking, dancing, laughing. The slick-haired Latino Garth had seen with her in the news clipping was at her side, keeping a possessive hand on the small of her back.

While Garth was watching, Brenda Bodine stopped briefly at the table of a long-haired young man wearing a pince-nez, sitting with four girls who looked all of fourteen or fifteen.

"Who's the fellow over there with the underage harem?" Garth asked the bartender.

"Prince Igor von Furstin. Pretender to the German throne."

"The *German* throne?" Garth said incredulously. "There hasn't been a German throne in seventy years."

Shrugging with typical French indifference, the bartender said, "Tell him, not me, *monsieur.*"

As Garth continued to study the pulsating club, an idea began to form, a plan, risky but viable. He watched Brenda and her gigolo thread through the crowd back to their table as Prince Igor began to pour champagne at his own. Garth left the bar and made his way over to the prince's table.

"Prince Igor, may I introduce myself?" he asked deferentially, bowing slightly. "My name is Howard Hughes, Junior. I've always been a great admirer of the German throne, and I want to wish you the best of luck getting it back." Clasping the prince's hand with both of his own, he shook it vigorously, then quickly departed.

Crossing the room, he went directly to Brenda's table. "Excuse me," he said, ignoring her companion, "but I wonder if I could persuade you to help me win twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"Who on earth are you?" Brenda asked. She was a pretty, oval-faced young woman with close-trimmed blond hair and piercing, direct eyes much like her father's.

"My name is Elvis Rockefeller," Garth said. "I'm the nephew they never talk about. I just bet Igor—you know Igor von Furstin, don't you?" Garth turned and waved to the German pretender, who somewhat confusedly waved back. "I just bet him that I could go up to the best-looking woman in the room, invite her for a ride on my private jet, and that she'd accept."

"Well, I suggest you go pay him then," Brenda said with mock sweetness. "You just lost."

"I'll split the money with you."

"Not interested."

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"How about if we donate it to your favorite charity?"

"Señor," Brenda's escort rose to interrupt, "the señorita is not going. Kindly remove yourself."

"I see," Garth said. "Well, if *you* say she's not going, then I guess she isn't." Winking at the gigolo, he leaned over and whispered conspiratorially, but loudly enough for Brenda to hear, "Looks like you've got her pretty much under control, eh?"

"I beg your pardon!" Brenda said piquedly. "He has no say over what I do. If I wanted to go for a ride on your plane, I'd do it. As a matter of fact, I *will* do it!" Pushing away from the table, she grabbed Garth by the arm. "Come on!"

"We'll write," Garth said, smiling over his shoulder at the open-mouthed gigolo.

In the rear of the limo, speeding toward Nice, Garth said, "This is awfully sporting of you, Miss Bodine."

"At least it's something different to do," Brenda said distractedly. Then she frowned. "How do you know my name?"

"I read the tabloids," Garth said quickly, trying to cover.

"Who did you say you were?" she asked suspiciously.

"Elvis Rockefeller."

"Of the New York Rockefellers?"

"No," Garth said, suddenly becoming tired of the charade, "the California Rockefellers. We own a Texaco station in Anaheim."

"Who the hell *are* you?" Brenda demanded irately. He did not answer. "Is this a kidnapping?" she asked, not in the least fearfully.

"Not the kind you're thinking of."

"Well then, what? Sex?"

"No, I'm afraid my schedule won't permit it." He locked eyes with her in the muted rear-seat light. "Just relax, Miss Bodine. No one's going to hurt you."

Brenda sat back, arms folded tightly in front of her, seething with anger. In a very few minutes, at high speed, the limo reached the private airfield at Nice and drove onto the tarmac. As Garth helped her out of the limo, she saw the Lear with its circle of five stars on the tail.

"Oh no you don't!" she said furiously.

"Oh yes I do," Garth replied evenly.

As she started to jerk away, he hit her on the jaw with his fist: a short, almost feeble punch, its purpose to quiet her down rather than injure her. Nevertheless, because she was not expecting it, she was stunned, and collapsed into his arms. Garth carried her up the few stairs into the plane.

"Get clearance and take off for the island," he told the pilot.

Airborne over the Atlantic, heading for a refueling stop in Central America, Garth had Brenda stretched out on two seats that folded

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into a berth. He was putting an ice pack on her slightly bruised jaw when she opened her eyes.

"My father will fire you for beating me up like this," she warned.

"I didn't exactly beat you up," Garth said. "And I wish your father *would* fire me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she snapped.

"It's a long story," he replied vaguely.

"So's the trip to the island," she said. Brenda was studying his face now, the expression, the eyes; she sensed feelings, troubles, that he was keeping deep inside of him—just as she was. "Tell me," she said.

"I'm sure you wouldn't find it interesting, Miss Bodine."

"Stop calling me Miss Bodine. My name is Brenda. And I *want* to hear your story. I want to know why you hope my father fires you."

Garth studied her also, and felt a hint of the same unanticipated empathy that Brenda herself was feeling. Was she as much a psychological prisoner of the general as he was? he wondered.

"Come on," she coaxed. "Pour us a couple of brandies and tell me your story. Maybe I'll even tell you mine."

Garth opened a cabinet bar, poured their drinks, and sat down across from her.

"I was once married to a very lovely woman and had a beautiful little daughter," he began quietly, cheerlessly.

She was the first person to whom he had ever told the story. He was surprised how easy she was to talk to. He even told her about the ghastly nightmares that often could be voided only by alcohol.

When he finished talking, she began. He learned that she, in her own way, and for different reasons entirely, was as wounded inside as he was.

Hours later, when the plane finally chased down daylight, they felt they had no secrets between them.

When the Lear taxied to a halt on Ritilevu and Garth and Brenda alighted, Garth was surprised to see Marita sitting in her Jeep next to the arrival van.

"Hey," he said, pleased, "what are you doing back from school so soon?"

"My father had emergency gallbladder surgery. He wanted me here, so the general sent one of the other planes for me."

"Is your father all right?"

"Yes, he's fine, thank you." Marita glanced disdainfully at Brenda. "I didn't know you'd joined the jet set."

"Well, you see, the general—" Garth began, but got no farther.

"Marita, dear, I'm surprised too," Brenda purred. "I didn't know he had even met you. Shame on you, Peter, you didn't tell me

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you'd gone native when we were sharing all of our secrets crossing the ocean."

"Well, I was going to—"

"Exactly what secrets did you share with the poor little rich girl?" Marita asked snidely. "Anything I should know?"

"Marita, listen now—"

"Perhaps," Brenda interrupted, "he felt some things in his past were too complex for a simple native girl like you."

"As usual, Brenda, you seem to bring out the worst in people," Marita said. "Maybe it has something to do with your supercilious royal genes."

"Look who's talking," Brenda countered. "Miss Island Princess of the South Pacific."

"At least I'm legitimate," Marita retorted. Turning to Garth, she raised her nose an inch and said, "I'll say goodbye now. I'm sure Goldilocks here is going to keep you quite busy."

Starting the Jeep, Marita peeled away in a screech of rubber. Garth watched, mouth agape, as she drove off the tarmac. When he turned to look at Brenda, he saw that she was already in the van, instructing the driver to pull away.

"You're an ex-Marine, you can hike to the complex," she snapped through an open window. Still dumbfounded, he watched the van leave as well.

As he was standing there, Toki, the houseboy, drove up in Garth's Jeep and handed him a Manila folder.

"General say you leave again right away," he told Garth. "Other plane ready for you now." He pointed to the hangar, where one of the other Lear jets was being towed out for takeoff.

Garth opened the folder. The top item was a map of Namala, in western Africa. A small country that had broken off from Namibia, it had vast diamond resources, and at the moment was in the throes of a violent civil war among three rival factions vying for control of the government.

Looking up, Garth could still see, in one direction, Marita's Jeep, and in the other, the van carrying Brenda. Closing the folder, he patted Toki on the shoulder and strode off toward the other plane. Better a bloody revolution in Namala, he thought, than being on an island with those two.

He began to whistle the Marine Corps hymn as he walked. ●

NOTE TO READERS: If you are having trouble finding *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* at your favorite retailer, let us help. First, let the store manager know that you would like the store to carry *EQMM*. Then, send us a letter or postcard with the store's full name and address so that we can contact them too. Write to us at: Dell Magazines Fiction Group, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT, 06855-1220.

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Helping Others To Let Go

by Andrew Klavan & Laurence Klavan

A team of brothers created this dark but funny piece: Andrew Klavan, an *EQMM* veteran, had a stellar year in 1999. Morrow has just published his novel *Hunting Down Amanda,* and in March a movie based on his earlier novel, *True Crime,* was released. Laurence Klavan is an award-winning playwright whose most recent work, the musical *Libretto for Bed and Sofa,* is the winner of two Obie awards. ✝

Jane Joyce's house is quiet today. Nothing disturbs the silence of the two-bedroom clapboard in the upscale Westchester, New York suburb of Armonk. Jane can sip her morning coffee in peace, listening to the birdsong that filters through the screened door of her breezeway.

But it wasn't always like this. For seventeen years, this blond, bright-eyed, thirty-eight-year-old woman was a daily audience to the blaring, cacophonous suffering of her husband, Bill. A former high-school football captain, Bill was well-liked in the neighborhood and successful in his work as a construction supervisor. To all appearances, Bill and Jane had a happy marriage.

And yet, though few outside his family knew it, Bill suffered from an incurable form of Bellicosity, an ear-splitting compulsion to assert ill-founded opinions that, untreated over time, can cause debilitating stress to the mouth, lungs, mind, and spirit of its victim. Each of his bumptious pronouncements on politics, each contentious declaration on culture and, perhaps most unsettling, his Tourette-like ejaculations of "Am I right or am I right?" caused Jane's heart to well with pity for him.

"I knew he couldn't be happy living like that," Jane says. "But Bill was always such a good soldier. He didn't let on how much

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pain he was in. In the end, I think he was just holding on for my sake. I wanted him, at long last, to be able to let go."

After months of soul-searching and prayer, Jane—like thousands of other Americans—decided to attend a LifeQuench Seminar. Held every weekend in different towns across the country, these seminars are designed to guide people into doing for their loved ones what those loved ones can't do for themselves.

At the core of LifeQuench is a controversial method that goes one step beyond doctor-assisted suicide. It is the brainchild of forty-five-year-old Californian Dr. Kirk Jackovian, who has dubbed the program doctor-assisted homicide, or DAH.

"Countless numbers of us have spouses, relatives, friends, employers, and passing acquaintances who prove by their behavior that they're in terrible misery," Dr. Jackovian says. "These people are in no condition to make the decision to end their lives themselves, so we teach those who live with, or work for, or just occasionally have to see them how to find the courage to take that step on their behalf."

Slight, quill-haired, goggle-eyed, Dr. Jackovian speaks in a harsh, rasping whisper of how he first developed the LifeQuench system.

"My mother suffered from Eructive Corpulence. Of course, we didn't have a name for it then. The doctors just thought she was a gassy tub of lard. I remember she once came to a school concert where the tuba player got a standing ovation. And we didn't have a tuba player. I know it was hell for her, embarrassing me like that. I just wanted Mom to be at peace."

Young Kirk left home to attend medical school, but upon returning from Costa Rica, he discovered the problem had only gotten worse. Using his newly acquired scientific knowledge, Dr. Jackovian hit upon a method through which, by simply driving an ice pick repeatedly into the back of his mother's neck, he could end the poor woman's suffering forever.

"It was like a light going on," he says now, with a distant, dreamy smile. "Just as I was wrenching the pick out for the last time, I thought: Wait a minute, millions of people could benefit from this technique."

Dr. Jackovian knew that he would meet opposition from ethical groups and other entrenched interests, but he went ahead in the faith that, presented with the proper rationalizing pseudo-political phraseology, baby-boom Americans are willing to accept virtually any concept that will make their lives easier.

Today, it is apparent that he was right. LifeQuench Seminars are available for people like Jane Joyce in hotel rooms, cellars, and abandoned warehouses throughout the country.

When a visitor first walks into a LifeQuench Seminar, he or she

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is greeted by a smiling "Quenchy" in a blue T-shirt bearing the LQ logo. The Quenchy guides the potential "Death-Giver" to a metal chair and, in a one-on-one session, tries to give the newcomer a sense of what to expect.

"Doctor-assisted homicide is like any other form of death," says thirty-six-year-old Quenchy Bob. "We have to take the Death-Giver step-by-step through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, grief, and acceptance. Then, for the second half-hour, we try to lighten things up a little with role-playing and aerobics."

Indeed, much of one recent LifeQuench seminar was devoted to such body-building techniques as the "Two-Handed Pillow Press," or the "Isometric Rope Flex." One exercise—in which Death-Givers were asked to run up to an open window and quickly thrust out their arms shouting "Hoopla!"—left most people winded and laughing, and one lying facedown on the pavement six stories below.

The role-playing exercises, meanwhile, are meant to prepare Death-Givers mentally and emotionally for the sort of decisions they'll have to make. For instance, people might be asked to don flowing white robes, paste on long beards, and sit on thronelike chairs, holding a staff and making judgments on other people's right to exist.

But it's not all fun. The final hour of the seminar is devoted to strenuous training in the use of Dr. Jackovian's patented Homicide Machine. Seated at a computer terminal, the machine operator is carefully guided through a series of simple steps. At every stage, to avoid mishaps, the computer flashes a "fail-safe question" in large red letters: "Are you sure you don't want to stop not continuing?" Whether the answer is yes or no, the computer then releases a ball bearing, which rolls down a chute to where it turns a cog which opens a cage, releasing a mouse who nibbles through a rope which frees a flywheel, thus pulling a switch which causes a mechanical arm to repeatedly pound a claw hammer into the forehead of the Death-Receiver.

To be sure, there are still some—especially among religious organizations—who see problems with the LifeQuench approach. Reverend Calvin Stodgepole, of People Against Tomorrow, agreed to attend a seminar but voiced his misgivings.

"It's the end of the world!" Reverend Stodgepole remarked before the session. "The sacredness of life! The blood of Our Savior! The soul! Common decency! Repent! Repent!" Afterwards, it should be noted, the reverend tempered his comments, saying, "Well, it is rather convenient. Perhaps they're right."

Others, however, have given LifeQuench their full endorsement. Diane Bellow of the feminist group Sisters Hoping to Repair the Inequities of Life, feels doctor-assisted homicide also offers politi-

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cal benefits. "I think we've gotten mired in a patriarchal mindset in which a woman's right to choose whether to give birth or not ends with the birthing process itself," she says. "Dr. Jackovian is taking us beyond that."

In any case, thousands of satisfied customers, like Richard Nubless, a forty-seven-year-old sales representative from Wilmington, Pennsylvania, continue to support the seminars. "My teenage son Sam was terribly ill," Nubless says. "All right, not that terribly. But his orthodonture was costing me a bundle. And you know what a pain in the ass teenagers can be anyway. The LifeQuench method worked for me."

And, in her now-quiet Armonk home, Jane Joyce can go about her daily chores in the full knowledge that her husband has at last found rest.

"When the people we love suffer, we suffer too," Jane reflects. "And if we can give them relief through doctor-assisted homicide—well, it's party time." ●

ARNOLD THE WORM
by Jaye Thomas

Arnold the worm
Crawled round and round
In his house of tunnels
Under ground.
"I'm tired," he said,
"Of being in the dark,
Of putting air in the soil
In this grubby old park.
I want new friends
And to be in new places,
I'm tired and bored
With all the old faces.
I want a new job
Up on top of the earth."
So he pushed and he pushed
For all he was worth.
When he poked his head up
From under the grass,
"Look at me!" he said,
"Now I'm upperclass!
I'm free! I'm free!
As never before."
"Surprise!" said the robin,
"Not anymore!"

Poem©1999 by Jaye Thomas

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1999 EQMM Readers Award Ballot

The new year is always an occasion for reflecting on past accomplishments and future plans. This year the urge to assess one's efforts is irresistible—Y2K problems aside, is there anyone who isn't just a little bit awed by that number 2000? Like everyone else, we at *EQMM* are trying to project our future, but we need your help. The *EQMM* Readers Award gives us information we use in planning future issues. When an author appears on your list of finalists, we redouble our efforts to ensure that he or she makes a return appearance. If we see that certain types of stories are consistently garnering votes, we purchase more such tales for the coming year.

The authors whose work we presented for your enjoyment in 1999 are a mix of old friends and new acquaintances: several debuted with us as early as the 1950s; others made their first fiction sale this year. From the work of this gathering of already illustrious talents, rising stars, and novices whose light may well come to shine in the new century, we're asking you to choose three stories. The authors of the winning selections will be honored with a Readers Award plaque or scroll at an awards ceremony in New York City.

Think well upon your choices. It's important to the authors and equally to your editors, who want to go on providing you with first-class literary entertainment for many decades to come.

The rules for 1999 are as follows: Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two, if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner. However, since the award is intended for newly published works, reprints are excluded from the balloting. Only two reprints appeared in 1999, the two classic Ellery Queen stories in the September/October issue. All other stories published in *EQMM* in 1999 are eligible for the award.

Please refresh your memory of the year's selections by referring to the index on pages 140-142 before marking your entries. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the

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address below, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

The 1999 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 2000 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-sized stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 1999 EQMM Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Mail to: **The Editors**
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"That reminds me, Harry's up for parole next month."

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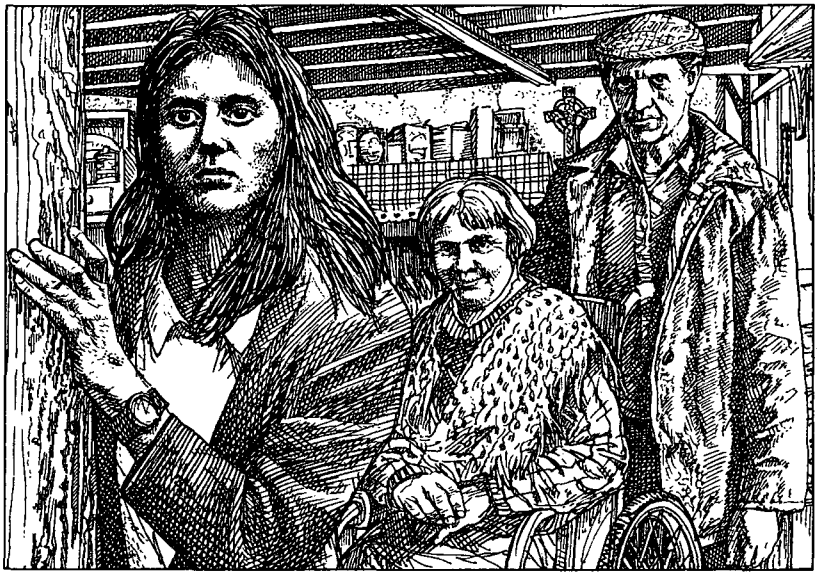

Art by Allen Davis

THE TINDER BOX

by Minette Walters

***The Daily Telegraph—Wednesday, 24th June, 1998

Sowerbridge Man Arrested

PATRICK O'RIORDAN, 35, an unemployed Irish labourer, was charged last night with the double murder of his neighbours Lavinia Fanshaw, 93, and her live-in nurse, Dorothy Jenkins, 67. The murders have angered the small community of Sowerbridge where O'Riordan and his parents have lived for fifteen years. The elderly victims were brutally battered to death after Dorothy Jenkins interrupted a robbery on Saturday night. "Whoever killed them is a monster," said a neighbour. "Lavinia was a frail old lady with Alzheimer's who never hurt a soul." Police warned residents to remain calm after a crowd gathered outside the O'Riordan home when news of the arrest became public. "Vigilante behaviour will not be tolerated," said a spokesman. O'Riordan denies the charges.

❖ ❖ ❖

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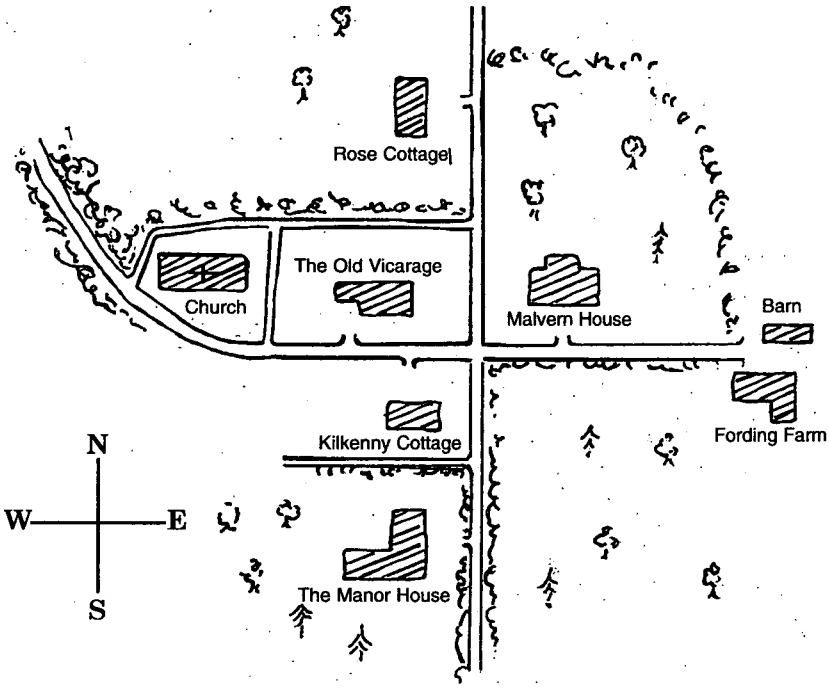
SOWERBRIDGE VILLAGE



11:30 P.M.—Monday, 8th March, 1999

Even at half past eleven at night, the lead news story on local radio was still the opening day of Patrick O'Riordan's trial. Siobhan Lavenham, exhausted after a fourteen-hour stint at work, listened to it in the darkness of her car while she negotiated the narrow country lanes back to Sowerbridge village.

". . . O'Riordan smiled as the prosecution case unfolded . . . harrowing details of how ninety-three-year-old Lavinia Fanshaw and her live-in nurse were brutally bludgeoned to death before Mrs. Fanshaw's rings were ripped from her fingers . . . scratch marks and bruises on the defendant's face, probably caused by a fight with one of the women . . . a crime of greed triggered by O'Riordan's known resentment of Mrs. Fanshaw's wealth . . . unable to account for his whereabouts at the time of the murders . . . items of jewellery recovered from the O'Riordan family home which the thirty-five-year-old Irishman still shares with his elderly parents . . ."

With a sinking heart, Siobhan punched the Off button and concentrated on her driving. *"The Irishman . . ."* Was that a deliberate attempt to inflame racist division, she wondered, or just careless shorthand? God, how she loathed journalists! Confident of a guilty verdict, they had descended on Sowerbridge like a

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plague of locusts the previous week in order to prepare their background features in advance. They had found dirt in abundance, of course. Sowerbridge had fallen over itself to feed them with hate stories against the whole O'Riordan family.

She thought back to the day of Patrick's arrest, when Bridey had begged her not to abandon them. "You're one of us, Siobhan. Irish through and through, never mind you're married to an Englishman. You know my Patrick. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Is it likely he'd beat Mrs. Fanshaw to death when he's never raised a hand against his own father? Liam was a devil when he still had the use of his arm. Many's the time he thrashed Patrick with a stick when the drunken rages were on him, but never once did Patrick take the stick to him."

It was a frightening thing to be reminded of the bonds that tied people together, Siobhan had thought as she looked out of Bridey's window towards the silent, angry crowd that was gathering in the road. Was being Irish enough of a reason to side with a man suspected of slaughtering a frail bedridden old woman and the woman who looked after her?

"Patrick admits he stole from Lavinia," Siobhan had pointed out.

Tears rolled down Bridey's furrowed cheeks. "But not her rings," she said. "Just cheap trinkets that he was too ignorant to recognise as worthless paste."

"It was still theft."

"Mother of God, do you think I don't know that?" She held out her hands beseechingly. "A thief he may be, Siobhan, but never a murderer."

And Siobhan had believed her because she wanted to. For all his sins, she had never thought of Patrick as an aggressive or malicious man—too relaxed by half, many would say—and he could always make her and her children laugh with his stories about Ireland, particularly ones involving leprechauns and pots of gold hidden at the ends of rainbows. The thought of him taking a hammer to anyone was anathema to her.

And yet . . .?

In the darkness of the car she recalled the interview she'd had the previous month with a detective inspector at Hampshire Constabulary Headquarters who seemed perplexed that a well-to-do young woman should have sought him out to complain about police indifference to the plight of the O'Riordans. She wondered now why she hadn't gone to him sooner.

Had she really been so unwilling to learn the truth . . .?

Wednesday, 10th February, 1999

The detective shook his head. "I don't understand what you're talking about, Mrs. Lavenham."

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Siobhan gave an angry sigh. "Oh, for goodness sake! The hate campaign that's being waged against them. The graffiti on their walls, the constant telephone calls threatening them with arson, the fact that Bridey's too frightened to go out for fear of being attacked. There's a war going on in Sowerbridge which is getting worse the closer we come to Patrick's trial, but as far as you're concerned, it doesn't exist. Why aren't you investigating it? Why don't you respond to Bridey's telephone calls?"

He consulted a piece of paper on his desk. "Mrs. O'Riordan's made fifty-three emergency calls in the eight months since Patrick was remanded for the murders," he said, "only thirty of which were considered serious enough to send a police car to investigate. In every case, the attending officers filed reports saying Bridey was wasting police time." He gave an apologetic shrug. "I realise it's not what you want to hear, but we'd be within our rights if we decided to prosecute her. Wasting police time is a serious offence."

Siobhan thought of the tiny, wheelchair-bound woman whose terror was so real she trembled constantly. "They're after killing us, Siobhan," she would say over and over again. "I hear them creeping about the garden in the middle of the night and I think to myself, there's nothing me or Liam can do if this is the night they decide to break in. To be sure, it's only God who's keeping us safe."

"But who *are* they, Bridey?"

"It's the bully boys whipped up to hate us by Mrs. Haversley and Mr. Jardine," wept the woman. "Who else would it be?"

Siobhan brushed her long dark hair from her forehead and frowned at the detective inspector. "Bridey's old, she's disabled, and she's completely terrified. The phone never stops ringing. Mostly it's long silences, other times it's voices threatening to kill her. Liam's only answer to it all is to get paralytically drunk every night so he doesn't have to face up to what's going on." She shook her head impatiently. "Cynthia Haversley and Jeremy Jardine, who seem to control everything that happens in Sowerbridge, have effectively given carte blanche to the local youths to make life hell for them. Every sound, every shadow has Bridey on the edge of her seat. She needs protection, and I don't understand why you're not giving it to her."

"They were offered a safe house, Mrs. Lavenham, and they refused it."

"Because Liam's afraid of what will happen to Kilkenny Cottage if he leaves it empty," she protested. "The place will be trashed in half a minute flat. . . . You know that as well as I do."

He gave another shrug, this time more indifferent than apologetic. "I'm sorry," he said, "but there's nothing we can do. If any of these attacks actually happened . . . well, we'd have something

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concrete to investigate. They can't even name any of these so-called vigilantes . . . just claim they're yobs from neighbouring villages."

"So what are you saying?" she asked bitterly. "That they have to be dead before you take the threats against them seriously?"

"Of course not," he said, "but we do need to be persuaded the threats are real. As things stand, they seem to be all in her mind."

"Are you accusing Bridey of lying?"

He smiled slightly. "She's never been averse to embroidering the truth when it suits her purpose, Mrs. Lavenham."

Siobhan shook her head. "How can you say that? Have you ever spoken to her? Do you even *know* her? To you, she's just the mother of a thief and a murderer."

"That's neither fair nor true." He looked infinitely weary, like a defendant in a trial who has answered the same accusation in the same way a hundred times before. "I've known Bridey for years. It's part and parcel of being a policeman. When you question a man as often as I've questioned Liam, you get to know his wife pretty well by default." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands loosely in front of him. "And sadly, the one sure thing I know about Bridey is that you can't believe a word she says. It may not be her fault, but it *is* a fact. She's never had the courage to speak out honestly because her drunken brute of a husband beats her within an inch of her life if she even dares to think about it."

Siobhan found his directness shocking. "You're talking about things that happened a long time ago," she said. "Liam hasn't struck anyone since he lost the use of his right arm."

"Do you know how that happened?"

"In a car crash."

"Did Bridey tell you that?"

"Yes."

"Not so," he countered bluntly. "When Patrick was twenty, he tied Liam's arm to a table top and used a hammer to smash his wrist to a pulp. He was so wrought up that when his mother tried to stop him, he shoved her through a window and broke her pelvis so badly she's never been able to walk again. That's why she's in a wheelchair and why Liam has a useless right arm. Patrick got off lightly by pleading provocation because of Liam's past brutality towards him, and spent less than two years in prison for it."

Siobhan shook her head. "I don't believe you."

"It's true." He rubbed a tired hand around his face. "Trust me, Mrs. Lavenham."

"I can't," she said flatly. "You've never lived in Sowerbridge, Inspector. There's not a soul in that village who doesn't have it in

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for the O'Riordans and a juicy tidbit like that would have been repeated a thousand times. Trust *me.*"

"No one knows about it." The man held her gaze for a moment, then dropped his eyes. "It was fifteen years ago and it happened in London. I was a raw recruit with the Met, and Liam was on our ten-most-wanted list. He was a scrap-metal merchant, and up to his neck in villainy, until Patrick scuppered him for good. He sold up when the lad went to prison and moved himself and Bridey down here to start a new life. When Patrick joined them after his release, the story of the car crash had already been accepted."

She shook her head again. "Patrick came over from Ireland after being wounded by a terrorist bomb. That's why he smiles all the time. The nerves in his cheek were severed by a piece of flying glass." She sighed. "It's another kind of disability. People take against him because they think he's laughing at them."

"No, ma'am, it was a revenge attack in prison for stealing from his cell mate. His face was slashed with a razor. As far as I know, he's never set foot in Ireland."

She didn't answer. Instead she ran her hand rhythmically over her skirt while she tried to collect her thoughts. *Oh, Bridey, Bridey, Bridey . . . Have you been lying to me . . . ?*

The inspector watched her with compassion. "Nothing happens in a vacuum, Mrs. Lavenham."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"Meaning that Patrick murdered Mrs. Fanshaw—" he paused—"and both Liam and Bridey know he did. You can argue that the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of his father as a child provoked an anger in him that he couldn't control—it's a defence that worked after the attack on Liam—but it won't cut much ice with a jury when the victims were two defenceless old ladies. That's why Bridey's jumping at shadows. She knows that she effectively signed Mrs. Fanshaw's death warrant when she chose to keep quiet about how dangerous Patrick was, and she's terrified of it becoming public." He paused. "Which it certainly will during the trial."

Was he right, Siobhan wondered? Were Bridey's fears rooted in guilt? "That doesn't absolve the police of responsibility for their safety," she pointed out.

"No," he agreed, "except we don't believe their safety's in question. Frankly, all the evidence so far points to Liam himself being the instigator of the hate campaign. The grafitti is always done at night in car spray paint, at least a hundred cans of which are stored in Liam's shed. There are never any witnesses to it, and by the time Bridey calls us the perpetrators are long gone. We've no idea if the phone rings as constantly as they claim, but on every

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occasion that a threat has been made, Bridey admits she was alone in the cottage. We think Liam is making the calls himself."

She shook her head in bewilderment. "Why would he do that?"

"To prejudice the trial?" he suggested. "He has a different mindset to you and me, ma'am, and he's quite capable of trashing Kilkenny Cottage himself if he thinks it will win Patrick some sympathy with a jury."

Did she believe him? Was Liam that clever? "You said you were always questioning him. Why? What had he done?"

"Any scam involving cars. Theft. Forging M.O.T. certificates. Odometer fixing. You name it, Liam was involved in it. The scrap-metal business was just a front for a car-laundering operation."

"You're talking about when he was in London?"

"Yes."

She pondered for a moment. "Did he go to prison for it?"

"Once or twice. Most of the time he managed to avoid conviction. He had money in those days—a lot of money—and could pay top briefs to get him off. He shipped some of the cars down here, presumably with the intention of starting the same game again, but he was a broken man after Patrick smashed his arm. I'm told he gave up grafting for himself and took to living off disability benefit instead. There's no way anyone was going to employ him. He's too unreliable to hold down a job. Just like his son."

"I see," said Siobhan slowly.

He waited for her to go on, and when she didn't he said: "Leopards don't change their spots, Mrs. Lavenham. I wish I could say they did, but I've been a policeman too long to believe anything so naive."

She surprised him by laughing. "Leopards?" she echoed. "And there was me thinking we were talking about dogs."

"I don't follow."

"Give a dog a bad name and hang him. Did the police *ever* intend to let them wipe the slate clean and start again, Inspector?"

He smiled slightly. "We did . . . for fifteen years. . . . Then Patrick murdered Mrs. Fanshaw."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "He used the same hammer on her that he used on his father."

Siobhan remembered the sense of shock that had swept through the village the previous June when the two bodies were discovered by the local milkman after his curiosity had been piqued by the fact that the front door had been standing ajar at 5:30 on a Sunday morning. Thereafter, only the police and Lavinia's grandson had seen inside the house, but the rumour machine described a scene of carnage, with Lavinia's brains splattered across the walls of her bedroom and her nurse lying in a pool of blood in the

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kitchen. It was inconceivable that anyone in Sowerbridge could have done such a thing, and it was assumed the Manor House had been targeted by an outside gang for whatever valuables the old woman might possess.

It was never very clear why police suspicion had centred so rapidly on Patrick O'Riordan. Gossip said his fingerprints were all over the house and his toolbox was found in the kitchen, but Siobhan had always believed the police had received a tipoff. Whatever the reason, the matter appeared to be settled when a search warrant unearthed Lavinia's jewellery under his floorboards and Patrick was formally charged with the murders.

Predictably, shock had turned to fury but, with Patrick already in custody, it was Liam and Bridey who took the full brunt of Sowerbridge's wrath. Their presence in the village had never been a particularly welcome one—indeed, it was a mystery how "rough trade like them" could have afforded to buy a cottage in rural Hampshire, or why they had wanted to—but it became deeply unwelcome after the murders. Had it been possible to banish them behind a physical pale, the village would most certainly have done so; as it was, the old couple were left to exist in a social limbo where backs were turned and no one spoke to them.

In such a climate, Siobhan wondered, could Liam really have been stupid enough to ratchet up the hatred against them by daubing anti-Irish slogans across his front wall?

"If Patrick *is* the murderer, then why didn't you find Lavinia's diamond rings in Kilkenny Cottage?" she asked the inspector. "Why did you only find pieces of fake jewellery?"

"Who told you that? Bridey?"

"Yes."

He looked at her with a kind of compassion. "Then I'm afraid she was lying, Mrs. Lavenham. The diamond rings were in Kilkenny Cottage along with everything else."

2.

11:45 P.M.—Monday, 8th March, 1999

Siobhan was aware of the orange glow in the night sky ahead of her for some time before her tired brain began to question what it meant. Arc lights? A party? Fire, she thought in alarm as she approached the outskirts of Sowerbridge and saw sparks shooting into the air like a giant Roman candle. She slowed her Range Rover to a crawl as she approached the bend by the church, knowing it must be the O'Riordans' house, tempted to put the car into reverse and drive away, as if denial could alter what was happening. But she could see the flames licking up the front of Kilkenny Cottage by that time and knew it was too late for anything so sim-

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plistic. A police car was blocking the narrow road ahead, and with a sense of foreboding she obeyed the torch that signalled her to draw up on the grass verge beyond the church gate.

She lowered her window as the policeman came over, and felt the warmth from the fire fan her face like a Saharan wind. "Do you live in Sowerbridge, madam?" he asked. He was dressed in shirtsleeves, perspiration glistening on his forehead, and Siobhan was amazed that one small house two hundred yards away could generate so much heat on a cool March night.

"Yes." She gestured in the direction of the blaze. "At Fording Farm. It's another half-mile beyond the crossroads."

He shone his torch into her eyes for a moment—his curiosity whetted by her soft Dublin accent, she guessed—before lowering the beam to a map. "You'll waste a lot less time if you go back the way you came and make a detour," he advised her.

"I can't. Our driveway leads off the crossroads by Kilkenny Cottage and there's no other access to it." She touched a finger to the map. "There. Whichever way I go, I still need to come back to the crossroads."

Headlights swept across her rearview mirror as another car rounded the bend. "Wait there a moment, please." He moved away to signal towards the verge, leaving Siobhan to gaze through her windscreen at the scene of chaos ahead.

There seemed to be a lot of people milling around, but her night sight had been damaged by the brilliance of the flames; and the water glistening on the tarmac made it difficult to distinguish what was real from what was reflection. The rusted hulks of the old cars that littered the O' Riordans' property stood out in bold silhouettes against the light, and Siobhan thought that Cynthia Haversley had been right when she said they weren't just an eyesore but a fire hazard as well. Cynthia had talked dramatically about the dangers of petrol, but if there was any petrol left in the corroded tanks, it remained sluggishly inert. The real hazard was the time and effort it must have taken to manoeuvre the two fire engines close enough to weave the hoses through so many obstacles, and Siobhan wondered if the house had ever stood a chance of being saved.

She began to fret about her two small boys and their nanny, Rosheen, who were alone at the farmhouse, and drummed her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel. "What should I do?" she asked the policeman when he returned after persuading the other driver to make a detour. "I need to get home."

He looked at the map again. "There's a footpath running behind the church and the vicarage. If you're prepared to walk home, I suggest you park your car in the churchyard and take the footpath. I'll radio through to ask one of the constables on the other

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side of the crossroads to escort you into your driveway. Failing that, I'm afraid you'll have to stay here until the road's clear, and that could take several hours."

"I'll walk." She reached for the gear stick, then let her hand drop. "No one's been hurt, have they?"

"No. The occupants are away."

Siobhan nodded. Under the watchful eyes of half of Sowerbridge village, Liam and Bridey had set off that morning in their ancient Ford Estate, to the malignant sound of whistles and hisses. "The O'Riordans are staying in Winchester until the trial's over."

"So we've been told," said the policeman.

Siobhan watched him take a notebook from his breast pocket. "Then presumably you were expecting something like this? I mean, everyone knew the house would be empty."

He flicked to an empty page. "I'll need your name, madam."

"Siobhan Lavenham."

"And your registration number, please, Ms. Lavenham."

She gave it to him. "You didn't answer my question," she said unemphatically.

He raised his eyes to look at her but it was impossible to read their expression. "What question's that?"

She thought she detected a smile on his face and bridled immediately. "You don't find it at all suspicious that the house burns down the minute Liam's back is turned?"

He frowned. "You've lost me, Ms. Lavenham."

"It's *Mrs.* Lavenham," she said irritably, "and you know perfectly well what I'm talking about. Liam's been receiving arson threats ever since Patrick was arrested, but the police couldn't have been less interested." Her irritation got the better of her. "It's their son who's on trial, for God's sake, not them, though you'd never believe it for all the care the English police have shown them." She crunched the car into gear and drove the few yards to the churchyard entrance where she parked in the lee of the wall and closed the window. She was preparing to open the door when it was opened from the outside.

"What are you trying to say?" demanded the policeman as she climbed out.

"What am I trying to say?" She let her accent slip into broad brogue. "Will you listen to the man? And there was me thinking my English was as good as his."

She was as tall as the constable, with striking good looks, and colour rose in his cheeks. "I didn't mean it that way, Mrs. Lavenham. I meant, are you saying it was arson?"

"Of course it was arson," she countered, securing her mane of brown hair with a band at the back of her neck and raising her

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coat collar against the wind which two hundred yards away was feeding the inferno. "Are you saying it wasn't?"

"Can you prove it?"

"I thought that was your job."

He opened his notebook again, looking more like an earnest student than an officer of the law. "Do you know who might have been responsible?"

She reached inside the car for her handbag. "Probably the same people who wrote 'IRISH TRASH' across their front wall," she said, slamming the door and locking it. "Or maybe it's the ones who broke into the house two weeks ago during the night and smashed Bridey's Madonna and Child before urinating all over the pieces on the carpet. Who knows?" She gave him credit for looking disturbed at what she was saying. "Look, forget it," she said wearily. "It's late and I'm tired, and I want to get home to my children. Can you make that radio call so I don't get held up at the other end?"

"I'll do it from the car." He started to turn away, then changed his mind. "I'll be reporting what you've told me, Mrs. Lavenham, including your suggestion that the police have been negligent in their duty."

She smiled slightly. "Is that a threat or a promise, Officer?"

"It's a promise."

"Then I hope you have better luck than I've had. I might have been speaking in Gaelic for all the notice your colleagues took of my warnings." She set off for the footpath.

"You're supposed to put complaints in writing," he called after her.

"Oh, but I did," she assured him over her shoulder. "I may be Irish, but I'm not illiterate."

"I didn't mean—"

But the rest of his apology was lost on her as she rounded the corner of the church and vanished from sight.

Thursday, 18th February, 1999

It had been several days before Siobhan found the courage to confront Bridey with what the detective inspector had told her. It made her feel like a thief even to think about it. Secrets were such fragile things. Little parts of oneself that couldn't be exposed without inviting changed perceptions towards the whole. But distrust was corroding her sympathy and she needed reassurance that Bridey at least believed in Patrick's innocence.

She followed the old woman's wheelchair into the sitting room and perched on the edge of the grubby sofa that Liam always lounged upon in his oil-stained boiler suit after spending hours poking around under his unsightly wrecks. It was a mystery to

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Siobhan what he did under them, as none of them appeared to be driveable, and she wondered sometimes if he simply used them as a canopy under which to sleep his days away. He complained often enough that his withered right hand, which he kept tucked out of sight inside his pockets to avoid upsetting people, had deprived him of any chance of a livelihood, but the truth was, he was a lazy man who was only ever seen to rouse himself when his wife left a trailing leg as she transferred from her chair to the passenger seat of their old Ford.

"There's nothing wrong with his left hand," Cynthia Haversley would snort indignantly as she watched the regular little pantomime outside Kilkenny Cottage, "but you'd think he'd lost the use of both hands the way he carries on about his disabilities."

Privately, and with some amusement, Siobhan guessed the demonstrations were put on entirely for the benefit of the Honourable Mrs. Haversley, who made no bones about her irritation at the level of state welfare which the O'Riordans enjoyed. It was axiomatic, after all, that any woman who had enough strength in her arms to heave herself upstairs on her bottom, as Bridey did every night, could lift her own leg into a car. . . .

The Kilkenny Cottage sitting room—Bridey called it her "parlour"—was full of religious artefacts: a shrine to the Madonna and Child on the mantelpiece, a foot-high wooden cross on one wall, a print of William Holman Hunt's "The Light of the World" on another, a rosary hanging from a hook. In Siobhan, for whom religion was more of a trial than a comfort, the room invariably induced a sort of spiritual claustrophobia which made her long to get out and breathe fresh air again.

In ordinary circumstances, the paths of the O'Riordans, descendants of a roaming tinker family, and Siobhan Lavenham (nee Kerry), daughter of an Irish landowner, would never have crossed. Indeed, when she and her husband, Ian, first visited Fording Farm and fell in love with it, Siobhan had pointed out the eyesore of Kilkenny Cottage with a shudder and had predicted accurately the kind of people who were living there. Irish Gypsies, she said.

"Will that make life difficult for you?" Ian had asked.

"Only if people assume we're related," she answered with a laugh, never assuming for one moment that anyone would. . . .

Bridey's habitually cowed expression reminded Siobhan of an ill-treated dog, and she put the detective inspector's accusations reluctantly, asking Bridey if she had lied about the car crash and about Patrick never striking his father. The woman wept, washing her hands in her lap as if, like Lady Macbeth, she could cleanse herself of sin.

"If I did, Siobhan, it was only to have you think well of us. You're a lovely young lady with a kind heart, but you'd not have

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let Patrick play with your children if you'd known what he did to his father, and you'd not have taken Rosheen into your house if you'd known her uncle Liam was a thief."

"You should have trusted me, Bridey. If I didn't ask Rosheen to leave when Patrick was arrested for murder, why would I have refused to employ her just because Liam spent time in prison?"

"Because your husband would have persuaded you against her," said Bridey truthfully. "He's never been happy about Rosheen being related to us, never mind she grew up in Ireland and hardly knew us till you said she could come here to work for you."

There was no point denying it. Ian tolerated Rosheen O'Riordan for Siobhan's sake, and because his little boys loved her, but in an ideal world he would have preferred a nanny from a more conventional background. Rosheen's relaxed attitude to child rearing, based on her own upbringing in a three-bedroomed cottage in the hills of Donegal where the children had slept four to a bed and play was adventurous, carefree, and fun, was so different from the strict supervision of his own childhood that he constantly worried about it. "They'll grow up wild," he would say. "She's not disciplining them enough." And Siobhan would look at her happy, lively, affectionate sons and wonder why the English were so fond of repression.

"He worries about his children, Bridey, more so since Patrick's arrest. We get telephone calls too, you know. Everyone knows Rosheen's his cousin."

She remembered the first such call she had taken. She had answered it in the kitchen while Rosheen was making supper for the children, and she had been shocked by the torrent of anti-Irish abuse that had poured down the line. She raised stricken eyes to Rosheen's and saw by the girl's frightened expression that it wasn't the first such call that had been made. After that, she had had an answerphone installed, and forebade Rosheen from lifting the receiver unless she was sure of the caller's identity.

Bridey's sad gaze lifted towards the Madonna on the mantelpiece. "I pray for you every day, Siobhan, just as I pray for my Patrick. God knows, I never wished this trouble on a sweet lady like you. And for why? Is it a sin to be Irish?"

Siobhan sighed to herself, hating Bridey's dreary insistence on calling her a "lady." She did not doubt Bridey's faith, nor that she prayed every day, but she doubted God's ability to undo Lavinia Fanshaw's murder eight months after the event.

And if Patrick was guilty of it, and Bridey knew he was guilty . . .

"The issue isn't about being Irish," she said bluntly, "it's about whether or not Patrick's a murderer. I'd much rather you were honest with me, Bridey. At the moment, I don't trust any of you, and that includes Rosheen. Does she know about his past? Has

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she been lying to me, too?" She paused, waiting for an answer, but Bridey just shook her head. "I'm not going to blame you for your son's behaviour," she said more gently, "but you can't expect me to go on pleading his cause if he's guilty."

"Indeed, and I wouldn't ask you to," said the old woman with dignity. "And you can rest your mind about Rosheen. We kept the truth to ourselves fifteen years ago. Liam wouldn't have his son blamed for something that wasn't his fault. We'll call it a car accident, he said, and may God strike me dead if I ever raise my hand in anger again." She grasped the rims of her chair wheels and slowly rotated them through half a turn. "I'll tell you honestly, though I'm a cripple and though I've been married to Liam for nearly forty years, it's only in these last fifteen that I've been able to sleep peacefully in my bed. Oh yes, Liam was a bad man, and oh yes, my Patrick lost his temper once and struck out at him, but I swear by the Mother of God that this family changed for the better the day my poor son wept for what he'd done and rang the police himself. Will you believe me, Siobhan? Will you trust an old woman when she tells you her Patrick could no more have murdered Mrs. Fanshaw than I can get out of this wheelchair and walk. To be sure, he took some jewellery from her—and to be sure, he was wrong to do it—but he was only trying to get back what had been cheated out of him."

"Except there's no proof he was cheated out of anything. The police say there's very little evidence that any odd jobs had been done in the manor. They mentioned that one or two cracks in the plaster had been filled, but not enough to indicate a contract worth three hundred pounds."

"He was up there for two weeks," said Bridey in despair. "Twelve hours a day every day."

"Then why is there nothing to show for it?"

"I don't know," said the old woman with difficulty. "All I can tell you is that he came home every night with stories about what he'd been doing. One day it was getting the heating system to work, the next re-laying the floor tiles in the kitchen where they'd come loose. It was Miss Jenkins who was telling him what needed doing, and she was thrilled to have all the little irritations sorted out once and for all."

Siobhan recalled the detective inspector's words. *"There's no one left to agree or disagree,"* he had said. *"Mrs. Fanshaw's grandson denies knowing anything about it, although he admits there might have been a private arrangement between Patrick and the nurse. She's known to have been on friendly terms with him. . . ."*

"The police are saying Patrick only invented the contract in order to explain why his fingerprints were all over the manor house."

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"That's not true."

"Are you sure? Wasn't it the first idea that came into his head when the police produced the search warrant? They questioned him for two days, Bridey, and the only explanation he gave for his fingerprints and his toolbox being in the manor was that Lavinia's nurse had asked him to sort out the dripping taps in the kitchen and bathroom. Why didn't he mention a contract earlier? Why did he wait until they found the jewellery under his floorboards before saying he was owed money?"

Teardrops watered the washing hands. "Because he's been in prison and doesn't trust the police . . . because he didn't kill Mrs. Fanshaw . . . because he was more worried about being charged with the theft of her jewellery than he was about being charged with murder. Do you think he'd have invented a contract that didn't exist? My boy isn't stupid, Siobhan. He doesn't tell stories that he can't back up. Not when he's had two whole days to think about them."

Siobhan shook her head. "Except he couldn't back it up. You're the only person, other than Patrick, who claims to know anything about it, and your word means nothing because you're his mother."

"But don't you see?" the woman pleaded. "That's why you can be sure Patrick's telling the truth. If he'd believed for one moment it would all be denied, he'd have given some other reason for why he took the jewellery. Do you hear what I'm saying? He's a good liar, Siobhan—for his sins, he always has been—and he'd not have invented a poor, weak story like the one he's been saddled with."

3.

Tuesday, 23rd June, 1998

It was a rambling defence that Patrick finally produced when it dawned on him that the police were serious about charging him with the murders. Siobhan heard both Bridey's and the inspector's versions of it, and she wasn't surprised that the police found it difficult to swallow. It depended almost entirely on the words and actions of the murdered nurse.

Patrick claimed Dorothy Jenkins had come to Kilkenny Cottage and asked him if he was willing to do some odd jobs at the Manor House for a cash sum of three hundred pounds. "I've finally persuaded her miserable skinflint of a grandson that I'll walk out one day and not come back if he doesn't do something about my working conditions, so he's agreed to pay up," she had said triumphantly. "Are you interested, Patrick? It's a bit of moonlighting . . . no VAT . . . no Inland Revenue . . . just a couple of weeks' work for money in hand. But for goodness sake don't go talking about

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it," she had warned him, "or you can be sure Cynthia Haversley will notify social services that you're working and you'll lose your unemployment benefit. You know what an interfering busybody she is."

"I needed convincing she wasn't pulling a fast one," Patrick told the police. "I've been warned off in the past by that bastard grandson of Mrs. F's and the whole thing seemed bloody unlikely to me. So she takes me along to see him, and he's nice as pie, shakes me by the hand and says it's a kosher contract. We'll let bygones be bygones, he says. I worked like a dog for two weeks and, yes, of course I went into Mrs. Fanshaw's bedroom. I popped in every morning because she and I were mates. I would say 'hi,' and she would giggle and say 'hi' back. And yes, I touched almost everything in the house—most of the time I was moving furniture around for Miss Jenkins. 'It's so boring when you get too old to change things,' she'd say to me. 'Let's see how that table looks in here.' Then she'd clap her hands and say: 'Isn't this exciting?' I thought she was almost as barmy as the old lady, but I wasn't going to argue with her. I mean, three hundred quid is three hundred quid, and if that's what was wanted I was happy to do the business."

On the second Saturday—"the day I was supposed to be paid . . . shit . . . I should have known it was a scam . . ."—Mrs. Fanshaw's grandson was in the Manor House hall waiting for him when he arrived.

"I thought the bastard had come to give me my wages, but instead he accuses me of nicking a necklace. I called him a bloody liar, so he took a swing at me and landed one on my jaw. Next thing I know, I'm out the front door, facedown on the gravel. Yeah, of course that's how I got the scratches. I've never hit a woman in my life, and I certainly didn't get into a fight with either of the old biddies at the manor."

There was a two-hour hiatus during which he claimed to have driven around in a fury wondering how "to get the bastard to pay what he owed." He toyed with the idea of going to the police—"I was pretty sure Miss Jenkins would back me up, she was that mad with him, but I didn't reckon you lot could do anything, not without social services getting to hear about it, and then I'd be worse off than I was before . . . "—But in the end he opted for more direct action and sneaked back to Sowerbridge Manor through the gate at the bottom of the garden.

"I knew Miss Jenkins would see me right if she could. And she did. 'Take this, Patrick,' she said, handing me some of Mrs. F's jewellery, 'and if there's any comeback I'll say it was my idea.' I tell you," he finished aggressively, "I'm gutted she and Mrs. F are

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dead. At least they treated me like a friend, which is more than can be said of the rest of Sowerbridge."

He was asked why he hadn't mentioned any of this before. "Because I'm not a fool," he said. "Word has it Mrs. F was killed for her jewellery. Do you think I'm going to admit having some of it under my floorboards when she was battered to death a few hours later?"

Thursday, 18th February, 1999

Siobhan pondered in silence for a minute or two. "Weak or not, Bridey, it's the one he has to go to trial with, and at the moment no one believes it. It would be different if he could prove any of it."

"How?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "Did he show the jewellery to anyone *before* Lavinia was killed?"

A sly expression crept into the woman's eyes as if a new idea had suddenly occurred to her. "Only to me and Rosheen," she said, "but, as you know, Siobhan, not a word we say is believed."

"Did either of you mention it to anyone else?"

"Why would we? When all's said and done, he took the things without permission, never mind it was Miss Jenkins who gave them to him."

"Well, it's a pity Rosheen didn't tell me about it. It would make a world of difference if I could say I knew on the Saturday afternoon that Patrick already had Lavinia's necklace in his possession."

Bridey looked away towards her Madonna, crossing herself as she did so, and Siobhan knew she was lying. "She thinks the world of you, Siobhan. She'd not embarrass you by making you a party to her cousin's troubles. In any case, you'd not have been interested. Was your mind not taken up with cooking that day? Was that not the Saturday you were entertaining Mr. and Mrs. Haversley to dinner to pay off all the dinners you've had from them but never wanted?"

There were no secrets in a village, thought Siobhan, and if Bridey knew how much Ian and she detested the grinding tedium of Sowerbridge social life, which revolved around the all-too-regular "dinner party," presumably the rest of Sowerbridge did as well. "Are we really that obvious, Bridey?"

"To the Irish, maybe, but not to the English," said the old woman with a crooked smile. "The English see what they want to see. If you don't believe me, Siobhan, look at the way they've condemned my poor Patrick as a murdering thief before he's even been tried."

Siobhan had questioned Rosheen about the jewellery afterwards and, like Bridey, the girl had wrung her hands in distress. But

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Rosheen's distress had everything to do with her aunt expecting her to perjure herself and nothing at all to do with the facts. "Oh, Siobhan," she had wailed, "does she expect me to stand up in court and tell lies? Because it'll not do Patrick any good when they find me out. Surely it's better to say nothing than to keep inventing stories that no one believes?"

11:55 P.M.—Monday, 8th March, 1999

It was cold on the footpath because the wall of The Old Vicarage was reflecting the heat back towards Kilkenny Cottage, but the sound of the burning house was deafening. The pine rafters and ceiling joists popped and exploded like intermittent rifle fire while the flames kept up a hungry roar. As Siobhan emerged onto the road leading up from the junction, she found herself in a crowd of her neighbours, who seemed to be watching the blaze in a spirit of revelry—almost, she thought in amazement, as if it were a spectacular fireworks display put on for their enjoyment. People raised their arms and pointed whenever a new rafter caught alight, and "oohs" and "ahs" burst out of their mouths like a cheer. Any moment now, she thought cynically, and they'd bring out an effigy of that other infamous Catholic, Guy Fawkes, who was ritually burnt every year for trying to blow up the Houses of Parliament.

She started to work her way through the crowd but was stopped by Nora Bentley, the elderly doctor's wife, who caught her arm and drew her close. The Bentleys were far and away Siobhan's favourites among her neighbours, being the only ones with enough tolerance to stand against the continuous barrage of anti-O'Riordan hatred that poured from the mouths of almost everyone else. Although as Ian often pointed out, they could afford to be tolerant. "Be fair, Siobhan. Lavinia wasn't related to them. They might feel differently if she'd been *their* granny."

"We've been worried about you, my dear," said Nora. "What with all this going on, we didn't know whether you were trapped inside the farm or outside."

Siobhan gave her a quick hug. "Outside. I stayed late at work to sort out some contracts, and I've had to abandon the car at the church."

"Well, I'm afraid your drive's completely blocked with fire engines. If it's any consolation, we're all in the same boat, although Jeremy Jardine and the Haversleys have the added worry of sparks carrying on the wind and setting light to their houses." She chuckled suddenly. "You have to laugh. Cynthia bullied the firemen into taking preventative measures by hosing down the front of Malvern House, and now she's tearing strips off poor old Peter because he left their bedroom window open. The whole room's completely saturated."

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Siobhan grinned. "Good," she said unsympathetically. "It's time Cynthia had some of her own medicine."

Nora wagged an admonishing finger at her. "Don't be too hard on her, my dear. For all her sins, Cynthia can be very kind when she wants to be. It's a pity you've never seen that side of her."

"I'm not sure I'd want to," said Siobhan cynically. "At a guess, she only shows it when she's offering charity. Where are they, anyway?"

"I've no idea. I expect Peter's making up the spare-room beds and Cynthia's at the front somewhere behaving like the chief constable. You know how bossy she is."

"Yes," agreed Siobhan, who had been on the receiving end of Cynthia's hectoring tongue more often than she cared to remember. Indeed, if she had any regrets about moving to Sowerbridge, they were all centred around the overbearing personality of the Honourable Mrs. Haversley.

By one of those legal quirks of which the English are so fond, the owners of Malvern House had title to the first hundred feet of Fording Farm's driveway while the owners of the farm had right of way in perpetuity across it. This had led to a state of war existing between the two households, although it was a war that had been going on long before the Lavenhams' insignificant tenure of eighteen months. Ian maintained that Cynthia's insistence on her rights stemmed from the fact that the Haversleys were, and always had been, the poor relations of the Fanshaws at the Manor House. ("You get slowly more impoverished if you inherit through the distaff side," he said, "and Peter's family has never been able to lay claim to the manor. It's made Cynthia bitter.") Nevertheless, had he and Siobhan paid heed to their solicitor's warnings, they might have questioned why such a beautiful place had had five different owners in under ten years. Instead, they had accepted the previous owners' assurances that everything in the garden was lovely—*You'll like Cynthia Haversley. She's a charming woman.*—and put the rapid turnover down to coincidence.

Something that sounded like a grenade detonating exploded in the heart of the fire and Nora Bentley jumped. She tapped her heart with a fluttery hand. "Goodness me, it's just like the war," she said in a rush. "*So* exciting." She tempered this surprising statement by adding that she felt sorry for the O'Riordans, but her sympathy came a poor second to her desire for sensation.

"Are Liam and Bridey here?" asked Siobhan, looking around.

"I don't think so, dear. To be honest, I wonder if they even know what's happening. They were very secretive about where they were staying in Winchester; unless the police know where they are, well—" she shrugged—"who could have told them?"

"Rosheen knows."

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Nora gave an absent-minded smile. "Yes, but she's with your boys at the farm."

"We are on the phone, Nora."

"I know, dear, but it's all been so sudden. One minute, nothing; the next, mayhem. As a matter of fact, I did suggest we call Rosheen, but Cynthia said there was no point. Let Liam and Bridey have a good night's sleep, she said. What can they do that the fire brigade haven't already done? Why bother them unnecessarily?"

"I'll bear that in mind when Cynthia's house goes up in flames," said Siobhan dryly, glancing at her watch and telling herself to get a move on. Curiosity held her back. "When did it start?"

"No one knows," said Nora. "Sam and I smelt burning about an hour and a half ago and came to investigate, but by that time the flames were already at the downstairs windows." She waved an arm at The Old Vicarage. "We knocked up Jeremy and got him to call the fire brigade, but the whole thing was out of control long before they arrived."

Siobhan's eyes followed the waving arm. "Why didn't Jeremy call them earlier? Surely he'd have smelt burning before you did? He lives right opposite." Her glance travelled on to the Bentleys' house, Rose Cottage, which stood behind The Old Vicarage, a good hundred yards distant from Kilkenny Cottage.

Nora looked anxious, as if she, too, found Jeremy Jardine's inertia suspicious. "He says he didn't, says he was in his cellar. He was horrified when he saw what was going on."

Siobhan took that last sentence with a pinch of salt. Jeremy Jardine was a wine shipper who had used his Fanshaw family connection some years before to buy The Old Vicarage off the church commissioners for its extensive cellars. But the beautiful brick house looked out over the O'Riordans unsightly wrecking ground, and he was one of their most strident critics. No one knew how much he'd paid for it, although rumour suggested it had been sold off at a fifth of its value. Certainly questions had been asked at the time about why a substantial Victorian rectory had never been advertised for sale on the open market, although, as usual in Sowerbridge, answers were difficult to come by when they involved the Fanshaw family.

Prior to the murders, Siobhan had been irritated enough by Jeremy's unremitting criticism of the O'Riordans to ask him why he'd bought The Old Vicarage, knowing what the view was going to be. "It's not as though you didn't know about Liam's cars," she told him. "Nora Bentley says you'd been living with Lavinia at the manor for two years before the purchase." He'd muttered darkly about good investments turning sour when promises of action failed to materialise and she had interpreted this as meaning he'd

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paid a pittance to acquire the property from the church on the mistaken understanding that one of his district councillor buddies could force the O'Riordans to clean up their frontage.

Ian had laughed when she told him about the conversation. "Why on earth doesn't he just offer to pay for the cleanup himself? Liam's never going to pay to have those blasted wrecks removed, but he'd be pleased as punch if someone else did."

"Perhaps he can't afford it. Nora says the Fanshaws aren't half as well off as everyone believes, and Jeremy's business is no great shakes. I know he talks grandly about how he supplies all the top families with quality wine, but that case he sold us was rubbish."

"It wouldn't cost much, not if a scrap-metal merchant did it."

Siobhan had wagged a finger at him. "You know what your problem is, husband of mine? You're too sensible to live in Sowerbridge. Also, you're ignoring the fact that there's an issue of principle at stake. If Jeremy pays for the cleanup then the O'Riordans will have won. Worse still, they will be seen to have won because *their* house will also rise in value the minute the wrecks go."

He shook his head. "Just promise me you won't start taking sides, Shiv. You're no keener on the O'Riordans than anyone else, and there's no law that says the Irish have to stick together. Life's too short to get involved in their ridiculous feuds."

"I promise," she had said, and at the time she had meant it.

But that was before Patrick had been charged with murder. . . .

There was no doubt in the minds of most of Sowerbridge's inhabitants that Patrick O'Riordan saw Lavinia Fanshaw as an easy target. In November, two years previously, he had relieved the confused old woman of a Chippendale chair worth five hundred pounds after claiming a European directive required all hedgerows to be clipped to a uniform standard. He had stripped her laurels to within four feet of the ground in return for the antique, and had sold the foliage on to a crony who made festive Christmas wreaths.

Nor had he shown any remorse. "It was a bit of business," he said in the pub afterwards, grinning happily as he swilled his beer, "and she was pleased as punch about it. She told me she's always hated that chair." He was a small, wiry man with a shock of dark hair and penetrating blue eyes which stared unwaveringly at the person he was talking to—like a fighting dog whose intention was to intimidate. "In any case, I did this village a favour. The manor looks a damn sight better since I sorted the frontage."

The fact that most people agreed with him was neither here nor there. The combination of Lavinia's senility and extraordinary longevity meant Sowerbridge Manor was rapidly falling into disrepair, but this did not entitle anyone, least of all an O'Riordan, to take advantage of her. What about Kilkenny Cottage's frontage?

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people protested. Liam's cars were a great deal worse than Lavinia's overgrown hedge. There was even suspicion that her live-in nurse had connived in the fraud, because she was known to be extremely critical of the deteriorating conditions in which she was expected to work.

"I can't be watching Mrs. Fanshaw twenty-four hours a day," Dorothy Jenkins had said firmly, "and if she makes an arrangement behind my back, then there's nothing I can do about it. It's her grandson you should be talking to. He's the one with power of attorney over her affairs, but he's never going to sell this place before she's dead because he's too mean to put her in a nursing home. She could live forever the way she's going, and nursing homes cost far more than I do. He pays me peanuts because he says I'm getting free board and lodging, but there's no heating, the roof leaks, and the whole place is a death trap of rotten floorboards. He's only waiting for the poor old thing to die so that he can sell the land to a property developer and live in clover for the rest of his life."

Monday, 8th March, 1999

The crowd seemed to be growing bigger and more boisterous by the minute, but as Siobhan recognised few of the faces, she realised word of the fire must have spread to surrounding villages. She couldn't understand why the police were letting thrill-seekers through until she heard one man say that he'd parked on the Southampton Road and cut across a field to bypass the police block. There was much jostling for position; the smell of beer on the breath of one man who pushed past her was overpowering. He barged against her and she jabbed him angrily in the ribs with a sharp elbow before taking Nora's arm and shepherding her across the road.

"Someone's going to be hurt in a minute," she said. "They've obviously come straight from the pub." She manoeuvred through a knot of people beside the wall of Malvern House, and ahead of her she saw Nora's husband, Dr. Sam Bentley, talking with Peter and Cynthia Haversley. "There's Sam. I'll leave you with him and then be on my way. I'm worried about Rosheen and the boys." She nodded briefly to the Haversleys, raised a hand in greeting to Sam Bentley, then prepared to push on.

"You won't get through," said Cynthia forcefully, planting her corseted body between Siobhan and the crossroads. "They've barricaded the entire junction and no one's allowed past." Her face had turned crimson from the heat, and Siobhan wondered if she had any idea how unattractive she looked. The combination of dyed blond hair atop a glistening beetroot complexion was reminiscent of sherry trifle, and Siobhan wished she had a camera to

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record the fact. Siobhan knew her to be in her late sixties because Nora had let slip once that she and Cynthia shared a birthday, but Cynthia herself preferred to draw a discreet veil over her age. Privately (and rather grudgingly) Siobhan admitted she had a case, because her plumpness gave her skin a smooth, firm quality which made her look considerably younger than her years, though it didn't make her any more likeable.

Siobhan had asked Ian once if he thought her antipathy to Cynthia was an "Irish thing." The idea had amused him. "On what basis? Because the Honourable Mrs. Haversley symbolises colonial authority?"

"Something like that."

"Don't be absurd, Shiv. She's a fat snob with a power complex who loves throwing her weight around. No one likes her. *I* certainly don't. She probably wouldn't be so bad if her wet husband had ever stood up to her, but poor old Peter's as cowed as everyone else. You should learn to ignore her. In the great scheme of things, she's about as relevant as birdshit on your windscreen."

"I *hate* birdshit on my windscreen."

"I know," he had said with a grin, "but you don't assume pigeons single your car out because you're Irish, do you?"

She made an effort now to summon a pleasant smile as she answered Cynthia. "Oh, I'm sure they'll make an exception of me. Ian's in Italy this week, which means Rosheen and the boys are on their own. I think I'll be allowed through in the circumstances."

"If you aren't," said Dr. Bentley, "Peter and I can give you a leg-up over the wall and you can cut through Malvern House garden."

"Thank you." She studied his face for a moment. "Does anyone know how the fire started, Sam?"

"We think Liam must have left a cigarette burning."

Siobhan pulled a wry face. "Then it must have been the slowest-burning cigarette in history," she said. "They were gone by nine o'clock this morning."

He looked as worried as his wife had done earlier. "It's only a guess."

"Oh, come on! If it was a smouldering cigarette you'd have seen flames at the windows by lunchtime." She turned her attention back to Cynthia. "I'm surprised that Sam and Nora smelt burning before you did," she said with deliberate lightness. "You and Peter are so much closer than they are."

"We probably would have done if we'd been here," said Cynthia, "but we went to supper with friends in Salisbury. We didn't get home until after Jeremy called the fire brigade." She stared Siobhan down, daring her to dispute the statement.

"Matter of fact," said Peter, "we only just scraped in before the

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police arrived with barricades. Otherwise they'd have made us leave the car at the church."

Siobhan wondered if the friends had invited the Haversleys or if the Haversleys had invited themselves. She guessed the latter. None of the O'Riordans' neighbours would have wanted to save Kilkenny Cottage, and unlike Jeremy, she thought sarcastically, the Haversleys had no cellar to skulk in. "I really must go," she said then. "Poor Rosheen will be worried sick." But if she expected sympathy for Liam and Bridey's niece, she didn't get it.

"If she were *that* worried, she'd have come down here," declared Cynthia. "With or without your boys. I don't know why you employ her. She's one of the laziest and most deceitful creatures I've ever met. Frankly, I wouldn't have her for love or money."

Siobhan smiled slightly. It was like listening to a cracked record, she thought. The day the Honourable Mrs. Haversley resisted an opportunity to snipe at an O'Riordan would be a red-letter day in Siobhan's book. "I suspect the feeling's mutual, Cynthia. Threat of death might persuade her to work for you, but not love or money."

Cynthia's retort, a pithy one if her annoyed expression was anything to go by, was swallowed by the sound of Kilkenny Cottage collapsing inwards upon itself as the beams supporting the roof finally gave way. There was a shout of approval from the crowd behind them, and while everyone else's attention was temporarily distracted, Siobhan watched Peter Haversley give his wife a surreptitious pat on the back.

4.

Saturday, 30th January, 1999

Siobhan had stubbornly kept an open mind about Patrick's guilt, although as she was honest enough to admit to Ian, it was more for Rosheen and Bridey's sake than because she seriously believed there was room for reasonable doubt. She couldn't forget the fear she had seen in Rosheen's eyes one day when she came home early to find Jeremy Jardine at the front door of the farm. "What are you doing here?" she had demanded of him angrily, appalled by the ashen colour in her nanny's cheeks.

There was a telling silence before Rosheen stumbled into words.

"He says we're murdering Mrs. Fanshaw all over again by taking Patrick's side," said the girl in a shaken voice. "I said it was wrong to condemn him before the evidence is heard—you told me everyone would believe Patrick was innocent until the trial—but Mr. Jardine just keeps shouting at me."

Jeremy had laughed. "I'm doing the rounds with my new wine list," he said, jerking his thumb towards his car. "But I'm damned

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if I'll stay quiet while an Irish murderer's cousin quotes English law at me."

Siobhan had controlled her temper because her two sons were watching from the kitchen window. "Go inside now," she told Rosheen, "but if Mr. Jardine comes here again when Ian and I are at work, I want you to phone the police immediately." She waited while the girl retreated with relief into the depths of the house. "I mean it, Jeremy," she said coldly. "However strongly you may feel about all of this, I'll have you prosecuted if you try that trick again. It's not as though Rosheen has any evidence that can help Patrick, so you're simply wasting your time."

He shrugged. "You're a fool, Siobhan. Patrick's guilty as sin. You know it. Everyone knows it. Just don't come crying to me later when the jury proves us right and you find yourself tarred with the same brush as the O'Riordans."

"I already have been," she said curtly. "If you and the Haversleys had your way, I'd have been lynched by now, but, God knows, I'd give my right arm to see Patrick get off, if only to watch the three of you wearing sackcloth and ashes for the rest of your lives."

Ian had listened to her account of the conversation with a worried frown on his face. "It won't help Patrick if he does get off," he warned. "No one's going to believe he didn't do it. Reasonable doubt sounds all very well in court, but it won't count for anything in Sowerbridge. He'll never be able to come back."

"I know."

"Then don't get too openly involved," he advised. "We'll be living here for the foreseeable future, and I really don't want the boys growing up in an atmosphere of hostility. Support Bridey and Rosheen by all means—" he gave her a wry smile—"but do me a favour, Shiv, and hold that Irish temper of yours in check. I'm not convinced Patrick is worth going to war over, particularly not with our close neighbours."

It was good advice, but difficult to follow. There was too much overt prejudice against the Irish in general for Siobhan to stay quiet indefinitely. War finally broke out at one of Cynthia and Peter Haversley's tedious dinner parties at Malvern House, which were impossible to avoid without telling so many lies that it was easier to attend the wretched things. "She watches the driveway from her window," sighed Siobhan when Ian asked why they couldn't just say they had another engagement that night. "She keeps tabs on everything we do. She knows when we're in and when we're out. It's like living in a prison."

"I don't know why she keeps inviting us," he said.

Siobhan found his genuine ignorance of Cynthia's motives

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amusing. "It's her favourite sport," she said matter-of-factly. "Bearbaiting . . . with me as the bear."

Ian sighed. "Then let's tell her the truth, say we'd rather stay in and watch television."

"Good idea. There's the phone. *You* tell her."

He smiled unhappily. "It'll make her even more impossible."

"Of course it will."

"Perhaps we should just grit our teeth and go?"

"Why not? It's what we usually do."

The evening had been a particularly dire one, with Cynthia and Jeremy holding the platform as usual, Peter getting quietly drunk, and the Bentleys making only occasional remarks. A silence had developed round the table and Siobhan, who had been firmly biting her tongue since they arrived, consulted her watch under cover of her napkin and wondered if nine forty-five was too early to announce departure.

"I suppose what troubles me the most," said Jeremy suddenly, "is that if I'd pushed to have the O'Riordans evicted years ago, poor old Lavinia would still be alive." He was a similar age to the Lavenhams and handsome in a florid sort of way—*Too much sampling of his own wares,* Siobhan always thought—and loved to style himself as Hampshire's most eligible bachelor. Many was the time Siobhan had wanted to ask why, if he was so eligible, he remained unattached, but she didn't bother because she thought she knew the answer. He couldn't find a woman stupid enough to agree with his own valuation of himself.

"You can't evict people from their own homes," Sam Bentley pointed out mildly. "On that basis, we could all be evicted any time our neighbours took against us."

"Oh, you know what I mean," Jeremy answered, looking pointedly at Siobhan as if to remind her that she was tarred with the O'Riordans' brush. "There must be something I could have done—had them prosecuted for environmental pollution, perhaps?"

"We should never have allowed them to come here in the first place," declared Cynthia. "It's iniquitous that the rest of us have no say over what sort of people will be living on our doorsteps. If the Parish Council was allowed to vet prospective newcomers, the problem would never have arisen."

Siobhan raised her head and smiled in amused disbelief at the other woman's arrogant assumption that the Parish Council was in her pocket. "What a good idea!" she said brightly, ignoring Ian's warning look across the table. "It would also give prospective newcomers a chance to vet the people already living here. It means house prices would drop like a stone, of course, but at least neither side could say afterwards that they went into it with their eyes closed."

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The pity was that Cynthia was too stupid to understand irony. "You're quite wrong, my dear," she said with a condescending smile. "The house prices would go *up*. They always do when an area becomes exclusive."

"Only when there are enough purchasers who want the kind of exclusivity you're offering them, Cynthia. It's basic economics." Siobhan propped her elbows on the table and leaned forward, stung into pricking the fat woman's self-righteous bubble once and for all, even if she did recognise that her real target was Jeremy Jardine. "And for what it's worth, there won't be any competition to live in Sowerbridge when word gets out that, *however* much money you have, there's no point in applying unless you share the Fanshaw mafia's belief that Hitler was right."

Nora Bentley gave a small gasp and made damping gestures with her hands.

Jeremy was less restrained. "Well, my God!" he burst out aggressively. "That's bloody rich coming from an Irishwoman. Where was Ireland in the war? Sitting on the sidelines, rooting for Germany, that's where. And you have the damn nerve to sit in judgment on us! All you Irish are despicable. You flood over here like a plague of sewer rats looking for handouts, then you criticise us when we point out that we don't think you're worth the trouble you're causing us."

It was like a simmering saucepan boiling over. In the end, all that had been achieved by restraint was to allow resentment to fester. On both sides.

"I suggest you withdraw those remarks, Jeremy," said Ian coldly, rousing himself in defence of his wife. "You might be entitled to insult Siobhan like that if your business paid as much tax and employed as many people as hers does, but as that's never going to happen I think you should apologise."

"No way. Not unless she apologises to Cynthia first."

Once roused, Ian's temper was even more volatile than his wife's. "She's got nothing to apologise for," he snapped. "Everything she said was true. Neither you nor Cynthia has any more right than anyone else to dictate what goes on in this village, yet you do it anyway. And with very little justification. At least the rest of us bought our houses fair and square on the open market, which is more than can be said of you or Peter. He inherited his, and you got yours cheap via the old-boy network. I just hope you're prepared for the consequences when something goes wrong. You can't incite hatred and then pretend you're not responsible for it."

"Now, now, now!" said Sam with fussy concern. "This sort of talk isn't healthy."

"Sam's right," said Nora. "What's said can never be unsaid."

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Ian shrugged. "Then tell this village to keep its collective mouth shut about the Irish in general and the O'Riordans in particular. Or doesn't the rule apply to them? Perhaps it's only the well-to-do English like the Haversleys and Jeremy who can't be criticised?"

Peter Haversley gave an unexpected snigger. "Well-to-do?" he muttered tipsily. "Who's well-to-do? We're all in hock up to our blasted eyeballs while we wait for the manor to be sold."

"Be quiet, Peter," said his wife.

But he refused to be silenced. "That's the trouble with murder. Everything gets so damned messy. You're not allowed to sell what's rightfully yours because probate goes into limbo." His bleary eyes looked across the table at Jeremy. "It's your fault, you sanctimonious little toad. Power of bloody attorney, my arse. You're too damn greedy for your own good. Always were . . . always will be. I kept telling you to put the old bloodsucker into a home but would you listen? Don't worry, you kept saying, she'll be dead soon . . ."

00:23 A.M.—Tuesday, 9th March, 1999

The hall lights were on in the farmhouse when Siobhan finally reached it, but there was no sign of Rosheen. This surprised her until she checked the time and saw that it was well after midnight. She went into the kitchen and squatted down to stroke Patch, the O'Riordans' amiable mongrel, who lifted his head from the hearth in front of the Aga and wagged his stumpy tail before giving an enormous yawn and returning to his slumbers. Siobhan had agreed to look after him while the O'Riordans were away and he seemed entirely at home in his new surroundings. She peered out of the kitchen window towards the fire, but there was nothing to see except the dark line of trees bordering the property, and it occurred to her then that Rosheen probably had no idea her uncle's house had gone up in flames.

She tiptoed upstairs to check on her two young sons who, like Patch, woke briefly to wrap their arms around her neck and acknowledge her kisses before closing their eyes again. She paused outside Rosheen's room for a moment, hoping to hear the sound of the girl's television, but there was only silence and she retreated downstairs again, relieved to be spared explanations tonight. Rosheen had been frightened enough by the anti-Irish slogans daubed across the front of Kilkenny Cottage; God only knew how she would react to hearing it had been destroyed.

Rosheen's employment with them had happened more by accident than design when Siobhan's previous nanny—a young woman given to melodrama—had announced after two weeks in rural Hampshire that she'd rather "die" than spend another night away from the lights of London. In desperation, Siobhan had

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taken up Bridey's shy suggestion to fly Rosheen over from Ireland on a month's trial—*"She's Liam's brother's daughter and she's a wonder with children. She's been looking after her brothers and her cousins since she was knee-high to a grasshopper, and they all think the world of her."*—and Siobhan had been surprised by how quickly and naturally the girl had fitted into the household.

Ian had reservations—*"She's too young . . . she's too scatterbrained . . . I'm not sure I want to be quite so cosy with the O'Riordans."*—but he had come to respect her in the wake of Patrick's arrest when, despite the hostility in the village, she had refused to abandon either Siobhan or Bridey. "Mind you, I wouldn't bet on family loyalty being what's keeping her here."

"What else is there?"

"Sex with Kevin Wyllie. She goes weak at the knees every time she sees him, never mind he's probably intimately acquainted with the thugs who're terrorising Liam and Bridey."

"You can't blame him for that. He's lived here all his life. I should imagine most of Sowerbridge could name names if they wanted to. At least he's had the guts to stand by Rosheen."

"He's an illiterate oaf with an IQ of ten," growled Ian. "Rosheen's not stupid, so what the hell do they find to talk about?"

Siobhan giggled. "I don't think his conversation is what interests her."

Recognising that she was too hyped-up to sleep, she poured herself a glass of wine and played the messages on the answerphone. There were a couple of business calls followed by one from Ian. *"Hi, it's me. Things are progressing well on the Ravenelli front. All being well, hand-printed Italian silk should be on offer through Lavenham Interiors by August. Good news, eh? I can think of at least two projects that will benefit from the designs they've been showing me. You'll love them, Shiv. Aquamarine swirls with every shade of terra cotta you can imagine."* Pause for a yawn. *"I'm missing you and the boys like crazy. Give me a ring if you get back before eleven, otherwise I'll speak to you tomorrow. I should be home on Friday."* He finished with a slobbery kiss which made her laugh.

The last message was from Liam O'Riordan and had obviously been intercepted by Rosheen. *"Hello? Are you there, Rosheen? It's . . . "* said Liam's voice before it was cut off by the receiver being lifted. Out of curiosity, Siobhan pressed one-four-seven-one to find out when Liam had phoned, and she listened in perplexity as the computerised voice at the other end gave the time of the last call as "twenty thirty-six hours," and the number from which it was made as "eight-two-seven-five-three-eight." She knew the sequence off by heart but flicked through the telephone index any-

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way to make certain. *Liam & Bridey O'Riordan, Kilkenny Cottage, Sowerbridge, Tel: 827538.*

For the second time that night her first instinct was to rush towards denial. It was a mistake, she told herself. . . . Liam couldn't possibly have been phoning from Kilkenny Cottage at eight-thirty. . . . The O'Riordans were under police protection in Winchester for the duration of Patrick's trial. . . . Kilkenny Cottage was empty when the fire started. . . .

But, oh dear God! Supposing it wasn't?

"Rosheen!" she shouted, running up the stairs again and hammering on the nanny's door. "Rosheen! It's Siobhan. Wake up! Was Liam in the cottage?" She thrust open the door and switched on the light, only to look around the room in dismay because no one was there.

Wednesday, 10th February, 1999

Siobhan had raised the question of Lavinia Fanshaw's heirs with the detective inspector. "You can't ignore the fact that both Peter Haversley and Jeremy Jardine had a far stronger motive than Patrick could ever have had," she pointed out. "They both stood to inherit from her will, and neither of them made any bones about wanting her dead. Lavinia's husband had one sister, now dead, who produced a single child, Peter, who has *no* children. And Lavinia's only child, a daughter, also dead, produced Jeremy, who's never married."

He was amused by the extent of her research. "We didn't ignore it, Mrs. Lavenham. It was the first thing we looked at, but you know better than anyone that they couldn't have done it because you and your husband supplied their alibis."

"Only from eight o'clock on Saturday night until two o'clock on Sunday morning," protested Siobhan. "And not out of choice either. Have you any idea what it's like living in a village like Sowerbridge, Inspector? Dinner parties are considered intrinsically superior to staying in of a Friday or Saturday night and watching telly, never mind the same boring people get invited every time and the same boring conversations take place. It's a status thing." She gave a sarcastic shrug. "Personally, I'd rather watch a good Arnie or Sly movie any day than have to appear interested in someone else's mortgage or pension plan, but then—*hell*—I'm Irish and everyone knows the Irish are common as muck."

"You'll have status enough when Patrick comes to trial," said the inspector with amusement. "You'll be the one providing the alibis."

"I wouldn't be able to if we'd managed to get rid of Jeremy and the Haversleys any sooner. Believe me, it wasn't Ian and I who kept them there—we did everything we could to make them go—they just refused to take the hints. Sam and Nora Bentley went at

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a reasonable time, but we couldn't get the rest of them to budge. Are you *sure* Lavinia was killed between eleven and midnight? Don't you find it suspicious that it's *my* evidence that's excluded Peter and Jeremy from the case? Everyone knows I'm the only person in Sowerbridge who'd rather give Patrick O'Riordan an alibi if I possibly could."

"What difference does that make?"

"It means I'm a reluctant witness, and therefore gives my evidence in Peter and Jeremy's favour more weight."

The inspector shook his head. "I think you're making too much of your position in all of this, Mrs. Lavenham. If Mr. Haversley and Mr. Jardine had conspired to murder Mrs. Fanshaw, wouldn't they have taken themselves to—say, Ireland—for the weekend? That would have given them a much stronger alibi than spending six hours in the home of a hostile witness. In any case," he went on apologetically, "we are sure about the time of the murders. These days, pathologists' timings are extremely precise, particularly when the bodies are found as quickly as these ones were."

Siobhan wasn't ready to give up so easily. "But you must see how odd it is that it happened the night Ian and I gave a dinner party. We *hate* dinner parties. Most of our entertaining is done around barbecues in the summer when friends come to stay. It's always casual and always spur-of-the-moment and I can't believe it was coincidence that Lavinia was murdered on the one night in the whole damn year for which we'd sent out invitations—" her mouth twisted—*"six weeks in advance. . . ."*

He eyed her thoughtfully. "If you can tell me how they did it, I might agree with you."

"Before they came to our house or after they left it," she suggested. "The pathologist's timings are wrong."

He pulled a piece of paper from a pile on his desk and turned it towards her. "That's an itemised British Telecom list of every call made from Sowerbridge Manor during the week leading up to the murders." He touched the last number. "This one was made by Dorothy Jenkins to a friend of hers in London and was timed at ten-thirty P.M. on the night she died. The duration time was just over three minutes. We've spoken to the friend and she described Miss Jenkins as at 'the end of her tether.' Apparently Mrs. Fanshaw was a difficult patient to nurse—Alzheimer's sufferers usually are—and Miss Jenkins had phoned this woman—also a nurse—to tell her that she felt like "smothering the old bitch where she lay." It had happened several times before, but this time Miss Jenkins was in tears and rang off abruptly when her friend said she had someone with her and couldn't talk for long." He paused for a moment. "The friend was worried enough to phone back after her visitor had gone," he went on, "and she esti-

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mates the time of that call at about a quarter past midnight. The line was engaged so she couldn't get through, and she admits to being relieved because she thought it meant Miss Jenkins had found someone else to confide in."

Siobhan frowned. "Well, at least it proves she was alive after midnight, doesn't it?"

The inspector shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The phone in the kitchen had been knocked off its rest—we think Miss Jenkins may have been trying to dial nine-nine-nine when she was attacked—" he tapped his finger on the piece of paper—"which means that, with or without the pathologist's timings, she must have been killed between that last itemised call at ten-thirty and her friend's return call at fifteen minutes past midnight, when the phone was already off the hook."

5.

00:32 A.M.—Tuesday, 9th March, 1999

Even as Siobhan lifted the receiver to call the police and report Rosheen missing, she was having second thoughts. They hadn't taken a blind bit of notice in the past, she thought bitterly, so why should it be different today? She could even predict how the conversation would go simply because she had been there so many times before.

Calm down, Mrs. Lavenham. . . . It was undoubtedly a hoax. . . . Let's see now . . . Didn't someone phone you not so long ago pretending to be Bridey in the throes of a heart attack . . . ? We rushed an ambulance to her only to find her alive and well and watching television. . . . You and your nanny are Irish. . . . Someone thought it would be entertaining to get a rise out of you by creeping into Kilkenny Cottage and making a call. . . . Everyone knows the O'Riordans are notoriously careless about locking their back door. . . . Sadly we can't legislate for practical jokes. . . . Your nanny . . . ? She'll be watching the fire along with everyone else. . . .

With a sigh of frustration, she replaced the receiver and listened to the message again. *"Hello? Are you there, Rosheen? It's . . ."*

She had been so sure it was Liam the first time she heard it, but now she was less certain. The Irish accent was the easiest accent in the world to ape, and Liam's was so broad any fool could do it. For want of someone more sensible to talk to, she telephoned Ian in his hotel bedroom in Rome. "It's me," she said, "and I've only just got back. I'm sorry to wake you but they've burnt Kilkenny Cottage and Rosheen's missing. Do you think I should phone the police?"

"Hang on," he said sleepily. "Run that one by me again. Who's they?"

"I don't know," she said in frustration. "Someone—anyone—

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Peter Haversley patted Cynthia on the back when the roof caved in. If I knew where the O'Riordans were I'd phone them, but Rosheen's the only one who knows the number—and she's not here. I'd go back to the fire if I had a car—the village is swarming with policemen—but I've had to leave mine at the church and yours is at Heathrow—and the children will never be able to walk all the way down the drive, not at this time of night."

He gave a long yawn. "You're going much too fast. I've only just woken up. What's this about Kilkenny Cottage burning down?"

She explained it slowly.

"So where's Rosheen?" He sounded more alert now. "And what the hell was she doing leaving the boys?"

"I don't know." She told him about the telephone call from Kilkenny Cottage. "If it was Liam, Rosheen may have gone up there to see him, and now I'm worried they were in the house when the fire started. Everyone thinks it was empty because we watched them go this morning." She described the scene for him as Liam helped Bridey into their Ford Estate then drove unsmilingly past the group of similarly unsmiling neighbours who had gathered at the crossroads to see them off. "It was awful," she said. "I went down to collect Patch, and bloody Cynthia started hissing at them so the rest joined in. I really hate them, Ian."

He didn't answer immediately. "Look," he said then, "the fire brigade don't just take people's words for this kind of thing. They'll have checked to make sure there was no one in the house as soon as they got there. And if Liam and Bridey *did* come back, their car would have been parked at the front and someone would have noticed it. Okay, I agree the village is full of bigots, but they're not murderers, Shiv, and they wouldn't keep quiet if they thought the O'Riordans were burning to death. Come on, think about it. You know I'm right."

"What about Rosheen?"

"Yes, well," he said dryly, "it wouldn't be the first time, would it? Did you check the barn? I expect she's out there getting laid by Kevin Wyllie."

"She's only done it once."

"She's used the barn once," he corrected her, "but it's anyone's guess how often she's been laid by Kevin. I'll bet you a pound to a penny they're tucked up together somewhere and she'll come wandering in with a smile on her face when you least expect it. I hope you tear strips off her for it, too. She's no damn business to leave the boys on their own."

She let it ride, unwilling to be drawn into another argument about Rosheen's morals. Ian worked on the principle that what the eye didn't see the heart didn't grieve over, and refused to recognise the hypocrisy of his position, while Siobhan's view was

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that Kevin was merely the bit of "rough" that was keeping Rosheen amused while she looked for something better. *God knew every woman did it . . . the road to respectability was far from straight.* . . . In any case, she agreed with his final sentiment. Even if it were Liam who phoned from the cottage, Rosheen's first responsibility was to James and Oliver. "So what should I do? Just wait for her to come back?"

"I don't see you have much choice. She's over twenty-one so the police won't do anything tonight."

"Okay."

He knew her too well. "You don't sound convinced."

She wasn't, but then she was more relaxed about the way Rosheen conducted herself than he was. The fact that they'd come home early one night and caught her in the barn with her knickers down had offended Ian deeply, even though Rosheen had been monitoring the boys all the time via a two-way transmitter that she'd taken with her. Ian had wanted to sack her on the spot, but Siobhan had persuaded him out of it after extracting a promise from Rosheen that the affair would be confined to her spare time in future. Afterwards, and because she was a great deal less puritanical than her English husband, Siobhan had buried her face in her pillow to stifle her laughter. Her view was that Rosheen had shown typical Irish tact by having sex outside in the barn rather than under the Lavenhams' roof. As she pointed out to Ian: *"We'd never have known Kevin was there if she'd smuggled him into her room and told him to perform quietly."*

"It's just that I'm tired," she lied, knowing she could never describe her sense of foreboding down the telephone to someone over a thousand miles away. Empty houses gave her the shivers at the best of times—a throwback to the rambling, echoing mansion of her childhood, which her overactive imagination had peopled with giants and spectres. . . . "Look, go back to sleep and I'll ring you tomorrow. It'll have sorted itself out by then. Just make sure you come home on Friday," she ended severely, "or I'll file for divorce immediately. I didn't marry you to be deserted for the Ravenelli brothers."

"I will," he promised.

Siobhan listened to the click as he hung up at the other end, then replaced her own receiver before opening the front door and looking towards the dark shape of the barn. She searched for a chink of light between the double doors but knew she was wasting her time even while she was doing it. Rosheen had been so terrified by Ian's threat to tell her parents in Ireland what she'd been up to that her sessions with Kevin were now confined to somewhere a great deal more private than Fording Farm's barn.

With a sigh she retreated to the kitchen and settled on a cush-

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ion in front of the Aga with Patch's head lying across her lap and the bottle of wine beside her. It was another ten minutes before she noticed that the key to Kilkenny Cottage, which should have been hanging from a hook on the dresser, was no longer there.

Wednesday, 10th February, 1999

"But why are you so sure it was Patrick?" Siobhan had asked the inspector then. "Why not a total stranger? I mean, anyone could have taken the hammer from his toolbox if he'd left it in the kitchen the way he says he did."

"Because there were no signs of a break-in. Whoever killed them either had a key to the front door or was let in by Dorothy Jenkins. And that means it must have been someone she knew."

"Maybe she hadn't locked up," said Siobhan, clutching at straws. "Maybe they came in through the back door."

"Have you ever tried to open the back door to the manor, Mrs. Lavenham?"

"No."

"Apart from the fact that the bolts were rusted into their sockets, it's so warped and swollen with damp you have to put a shoulder to it to force it ajar, and it screams like a banshee every time you do it. If a stranger had come in through the back door at eleven o'clock at night, he wouldn't have caught Miss Jenkins in the kitchen. She'd have taken to her heels the minute she heard the banshee-wailing and would have used one of the phones upstairs to call the police."

"You can't know that," argued Siobhan. "Sowerbridge is the sleepiest place on earth. Why would she assume it was an intruder? She probably thought it was Jeremy paying a late-night visit to his grandmother."

"We don't think so." He picked up a pen and turned it between his fingers. "As far as we can establish, that door was never used. Certainly none of the neighbours report going in that way. The milkman said Miss Jenkins kept it bolted because on the one occasion when she tried to open it, it became so wedged that she had to ask him to force it shut again."

She sighed, admitting defeat. "Patrick's always been so sweet to me and my children. I just can't believe he's a murderer."

He smiled at her naivete. "The two are not mutually exclusive, Mrs. Lavenham. I expect Jack the Ripper's neighbour said the same about him."

01:00 A.M.—Tuesday, 9th March, 1999

People began to shiver as the smouldering remains were dowsed by the fire hoses and the pungent smell of wet ashes stung their nostrils. In the aftermath of excitement, a sense of shame crept

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among the inhabitants of Sowerbridge—*schadenfreude* was surely alien to their natures?—and bit by bit the crowd began to disperse. Only the Haversleys, the Bentleys, and Jeremy Jardine lingered at the crossroads, held by a mutual fascination for the scene of devastation that would greet them every time they emerged from their houses.

"We won't be able to open our windows for weeks," said Nora Bentley, wrinkling her nose. "The smell will be suffocating."

"It'll be worse when the wind gets up and deposits soot all over the place," complained Peter Haversley, brushing ash from his coat.

His wife clicked her tongue impatiently. "We'll just have to put up with it," she said. "It's hardly the end of the world."

Sam Bentley surprised her with a sudden bark of laughter. "Well spoken, Cynthia, considering you'll be bearing the brunt of it. The prevailing winds are southwesterly, which means most of the muck will collect in Malvern House. Still—" he paused to glance from her to Peter—"you sow a wind and you reap a whirlwind, eh?"

There was a short silence.

"Have you noticed how Liam's wrecks have survived intact?" asked Nora then, with assumed brightness. "Is it a judgment, do you think?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Jeremy.

Sam gave another brief chortle. "Is it ridiculous? You complained enough when there were only the cars to worry about. Now you've got a burnt-out cottage to worry about as well. I can't believe the O'Riordans were insured, so it'll be years before anything is done. If you're lucky, a developer will buy the land and build an estate of little boxes on your doorstep. If you're unlucky, Liam will put up a corrugated-iron shack and live in that. And do you know, Jeremy, I hope he does. Personal revenge is so much sweeter than anything the law can offer."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'd have been wiser to call the fire brigade earlier," said the old doctor bluntly. "Nero may have fiddled while Rome burned, but it didn't do his reputation any good."

Another silence.

"What are you implying?" demanded Cynthia aggressively. "That Jeremy could somehow have prevented the fire?"

Jeremy Jardine folded his arms. "I'll sue you for slander if you *are,* Sam."

"It won't be just me. Half the village is wondering why Nora and I smelt burning before you did, and why Cynthia and Peter took themselves off to Salisbury on a Monday evening for the first time in living memory."

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"Coincidence," grunted Peter Haversley. "Pure coincidence."

"Well, I pray for all your sakes you're telling the truth," murmured Sam, wiping a weary hand across his ash-grimed face, "because the police aren't the only ones who'll be asking questions. The Lavenhams certainly won't stay quiet."

"I hope you're not suggesting that one of us set fire to that beastly little place," said Cynthia crossly. "Honestly, Sam, I wonder about you sometimes."

He shook his head sadly, wishing he could dislike her as comprehensively as Siobhan Lavenham did. "No, Cynthia, I'm suggesting you knew it was going to happen, and even incited the local youths to do it. You can argue that you wanted revenge for Lavinia and Dorothy's deaths, but aiding and abetting any crime is a prosecutable offence and—" he sighed—"you'll get no sympathy from me if you go to prison for it."

Behind them, in the hall of Malvern House, the telephone began to ring. . . .

Wednesday, 10th February, 1999

Siobhan had put an opened envelope on the desk in front of the detective inspector. "Even if Patrick is the murderer and even if Bridey knows he is, it doesn't excuse this kind of thing," she said. "I can't prove it came from Cynthia Haversley, but I'm a hundred percent certain it did. She's busting a gut to make life so unpleasant for Liam and Bridey that they'll leave of their own accord."

The inspector frowned as he removed a folded piece of paper and read the letters pasted onto it.

HAnGInG IS TOo GOoD foR THE LikEs of YOU.

BUrN in h e l l

"Who was it sent to?" he asked.

"Bridey."

"Why did she give it to you and not to the police?"

"Because she knew I was coming here today and asked me to bring it with me. It was posted through her letterbox sometime the night before last."

("They'll take more notice of you than they ever take of me," the old woman had said, pressing the envelope urgently into Siobhan's hands. "Make them understand we're in danger before it's too late.")

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He turned the envelope over. "Why do you think it came from Mrs. Haversley?"

Feminine intuition, thought Siobhan wryly. "Because the letters that make up 'hell' have been cut from a *Daily Telegraph* banner imprint. It's the only broadsheet newspaper that has an 'h,' an 'e,' and two 'l's in its title, and Cynthia takes the *Telegraph* every day."

"Along with how many other people in Sowerbridge?"

She smiled slightly. "Quite a few, but no one else has Cynthia Haversley's poisonous frame of mind. She loves stirring. The more she can work people up, the happier she is. It gives her a sense of importance to have everyone dancing to her tune."

"You don't like her." It was a statement rather than a question.

"No."

"Neither do I," admitted the inspector, "but it doesn't make her guilty, Mrs. Lavenham. Liam and/or Bridey could have acquired a *Telegraph* just as easily and sent this letter to themselves."

"That's what Bridey told me you'd say."

"Because it's the truth?" he suggested mildly. "Mrs. Haversley's a fat, clumsy woman with fingers like sausages, and if she'd been wearing gloves the whole exercise would have been impossible. This—" he touched the letter—"is too neat. There's not a letter out of place."

"Peter then."

"Peter Haversley's an alcoholic. His hands shake."

"Jeremy Jardine?"

"I doubt it. Poison-pen letters are usually written by women. I'm sorry, Mrs. Lavenham, but I can guarantee the only fingerprints I will find on this—other than yours and mine, of course—are Bridey O'Riordan's. Not because the person who did it wore gloves, but because Bridey did it herself."

01:10 A.M.—Tuesday, 9th March, 1999

Dr. Bentley clicked his tongue in concern as he glanced past Cynthia to her husband. Peter was walking unsteadily towards them after answering the telephone, his face leeched of colour in the lights of the fire engines. "You should be in bed, man. We should all be in bed. We're too old for this sort of excitement."

Peter Haversley ignored him. "That was Siobhan," he said jerkily. "She wants me to tell the police that Rosheen is missing. She said Liam called the farm from Kilkenny Cottage at eight-thirty this evening, and she's worried he and Rosheen were in there when the fire started."

"They can't have been," said Jeremy.

"How do you know?"

"We watched Liam and Bridey leave for Winchester this morning."

"What if Liam came back to protect his house? What if he

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phoned Rosheen and asked her to join him?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Peter!" snapped Cynthia. "It's just Siobhan trying to make trouble again. You know what she's like."

"I don't think so. She sounded very distressed." He looked around for a policeman. "I'd better report it."

But his wife gripped his arm to hold him back. "No," she said viciously. "Let Siobhan do her own dirty work. If she wants to employ a slut to look after her children then it's her responsibility to keep tabs on her, not ours."

There was a moment of stillness while Peter searched her face in appalled recognition that he was looking at a stranger, then he drew back his hand and slapped her across the face. "Whatever depths you may have sunk me to," he said, "I am *not* a murderer. . . ."

***LATE NEWS—The Telegraph—Tuesday, 9th March, A.M.

Irish Family Burnt Out by Vigilantes

The family home of Patrick O'Riordan, currently on trial for the murder of Lavinia Fanshaw and Dorothy Jenkins, was burnt to the ground last night in what police suspect was a deliberate act of arson. Concern has been expressed over the whereabouts of O'Riordan's elderly parents, and some reports suggest bodies were recovered from the gutted kitchen. Police are refusing to confirm or deny the rumours. Suspicion has fallen on local vigilante groups who have been conducting a "hate" campaign against the O'Riordan family. In face of criticism, Hampshire police have restated their policy of zero tolerance towards anyone who decides to take the law into his own hands. "We will not hesitate to prosecute," said a spokesman. "Vigilantes should understand that arson is a very serious offence."

6.

Tuesday, 9th March, 1999

When Siobhan heard a car pull into the driveway at 6:00 A.M. she prayed briefly, but with little hope, that someone had found Rosheen and brought her home. Hollow-eyed from lack of sleep, she opened her front door and stared at the two policemen on her

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doorstep. They looked like ghosts in the grey dawn light. Harbingers of doom, she thought, reading their troubled expressions. She recognised one of them as the detective inspector and the other as the young constable who had flagged her down the previous night. "You'd better come in," she said, pulling the door wide.

"Thank you."

She led the way into the kitchen and dropped onto the cushion in front of the Aga again, cradling Patch in her arms. "This is Bridey's dog," she told them, stroking his muzzle. "She adores him. *He* adores her. The trouble is he's a hopeless guard dog. He's like Bridey—" tears of exhaustion sprang into her eyes—"not overly bright—not overly brave—but as kind as kind can be."

The two policemen stood awkwardly in front of her, unsure where to sit or what to say.

"You look terrible," she said unevenly, "so I presume you've come to tell me Rosheen is dead."

"We don't know yet, Mrs. Lavenham," said the inspector, turning a chair to face her and lowering himself onto it. He gestured to the young constable to do the same. "We found a body in the kitchen area, but it'll be some time before—" He paused, unsure how to continue.

"I'm afraid it was so badly burnt it was unrecognisable. We're waiting on the pathologist's report to give us an idea of the age and—" he paused again—"sex."

"Oh, God!" she said dully. "Then it must be Rosheen."

"Why don't you think it's Bridey or Liam?"

"Because . . ." she broke off with a worried frown, "I assumed the phone call was a hoax to frighten Rosheen. Oh, my God! Aren't they in Winchester?"

He looked troubled. "They were escorted to a safe house at the end of yesterday's proceedings but it appears they left again shortly afterwards. There was no one to monitor them, you see. They had a direct line through to the local police station and we sent out regular patrols during the night. We were worried about trouble coming from outside, not that they might decide to return to Kilkenny Cottage without telling us." He rubbed a hand around his jaw. "There are recent tire marks up at the manor. We think Liam may have parked his Ford there in order to push Bridey across the lawn and through the gate onto the footpath beside Kilkenny Cottage."

She shook her head in bewilderment. "Then why didn't you find three bodies?"

"Because the Estate isn't there now, Mrs. Lavenham, and whoever died in Kilkenny Cottage probably died at the hands of Liam O'Riordan."

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Wednesday, 10th February, 1999

She had stood up at the end of her interview with the inspector. "Do you know what I hate most about the English?" she told him.

He shook his head.

"It never occurs to you, you might be wrong." She placed her palm on the poison-pen letter on his desk. "But you're wrong about this. Bridey cares about my opinion—she cares about *me*—not just as a fellow Irishwoman but as the employer of her niece. She'd never do anything to jeopardise Rosheen's position in our house, because Rosheen and I are her only lifeline in Sowerbridge. We shop for her, we do our best to protect her, and we welcome her to the farm when things get difficult. Under no circumstances *whatsoever* would Bridey use me to pass on falsified evidence, because she'd be too afraid I'd wash my hands of her and then persuade Rosheen to do the same."

"It may be true, Mrs. Lavenham, but it's not an argument you could ever use in court."

"I'm not interested in legal argument, inspector, I'm only interested in persuading you that there is a terror campaign being waged against the O'Riordans in Sowerbridge and that their lives are in danger." She watched him shake his head. "You haven't listened to a word I've said, have you? You just think I'm taking Bridey's side because I'm Irish."

"Aren't you?"

"No." She straightened with a sigh. "Moral support is alien to Irish culture, Inspector. We only really enjoy fighting with each other. I thought every Englishman knew *that*. . . ."

Tuesday, 9th March, 1999

The news that Patrick O'Riordan's trial had been adjourned while police investigated the disappearance of his parents and his cousin was broadcast across the networks at noon, but Siobhan switched off the radio before the names could register with her two young sons.

They had sat wide-eyed all morning watching a procession of policemen traipse to and from Rosheen's bedroom in search of anything that might give them a lead to where she had gone. Most poignantly, as far as Siobhan was concerned, they had carefully removed the girl's hairbrush, some used tissues from her wastepaper basket, and a small pile of dirty washing in order to provide the pathologist with comparative DNA samples.

She had explained to the boys that Rosheen hadn't been in the house when she got back the previous night, and because she was worried about it she had asked the police to help find her.

"She went to Auntie Bridey's," said six-year-old James.

"How do you know, darling?"

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"Because Uncle Liam phoned and said Auntie Bridey wasn't feeling very well."

"Did Rosheen tell you that?"

He nodded. "She said she wouldn't be long but that I had to go to sleep. So I did."

She dropped a kiss on the top of his head. "Good boy."

He and Oliver were drawing pictures at the kitchen table, and James suddenly dragged his pencil to and fro across the page to obliterate what he'd been doing. "Is it because Uncle Patrick killed that lady?" he asked her.

Siobhan searched his face for a moment. *The rules had been very clear. . . . Whatever else you do, Rosheen, please do not tell the children what Patrick has been accused of. . . .* "I didn't know you knew about that," she said lightly.

"Everyone knows," he told her solemnly. "Uncle Patrick's a monster and ought to be strung up."

"Goodness!" she exclaimed, forcing a smile to her lips. "Who said that?"

"Kevin."

Anger tightened like knots in her chest. *Ian had laid it on the line following the incident in the barn. . . . You may see Kevin in your spare time, Rosheen, but not when you're in charge of the children. . . .* "Kevin Wyllie? Rosheen's friend?" She squatted down beside him, smoothing a lock of hair from his forehead. "Does he come here a lot?"

"Rosheen said we weren't to tell."

"I don't think she meant you musn't tell me, darling."

James wrapped his thin little arms round her neck and pressed his cheek against hers. "I think she did, Mummy. She said Kevin would rip her head off if we told you and Daddy anything."

Later—Tuesday, 9th March, 1999

"I can't believe I let this happen," she told the inspector, pacing up and down her drawing room in a frenzy of movement. "I should have listened to Ian. He said Kevin was no good the minute he saw him."

"Calm down, Mrs. Lavenham," he said quietly. "I imagine your children can hear every word you're saying."

"But why didn't Rosheen tell me Kevin was threatening her? God knows, she should have known she could trust me. I've bent over backwards to help her and her family."

"Perhaps that's the problem," he suggested. "Perhaps she was worried about laying any more burdens on your shoulders."

"But she was responsible for my *children,* for God's sake! I can't believe she'd keep quiet while some low-grade neanderthal was terrorising her."

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The inspector watched her for a moment, wondering how much to tell her. "Kevin Wyllie is also missing," he said abruptly. "We're collecting DNA samples from his bedroom because we think the body at Kilkenny Cottage is his."

Siobhan stared at him in bewilderment. "I don't understand."

He gave a hollow laugh. "The one thing the pathologist *can* be certain about, Mrs. Lavenham, is that the body was upright when it died."

"I still don't understand."

He looked ill, she thought, as he ran his tongue across dry lips. "We're working on the theory that Liam, Bridey, and Rosheen appointed themselves judge, jury, and hangman before setting fire to Kilkenny Cottage in order to destroy the evidence."

*** The Telegraph—Wednesday, 10th March, A.M.

Couple Arrested

Two people, believed to be the parents of Patrick O'Riordan, whose trial at Winchester Crown Court was adjourned two days ago, were arrested on suspicion of murder in Liverpool yesterday as they attempted to board a ferry to Ireland. There is still no clue to the whereabouts of their niece Rosheen, whose family lives in County Donegal. Hampshire police have admitted that the Irish guardee have been assisting them in their search for the missing family. Suspicion remains that the body found in Kilkenny Cottage was that of Sowerbridge resident Kevin Wyllie, 28, although police refuse to confirm or deny the story.

Thursday, 11th March, 1999—4:00 A.M.

Siobhan had lain awake for hours, listening to the clock on the bedside table tick away the seconds. She heard Ian come in at two o'clock and tiptoe into the spare room, but she didn't call out to tell him she was awake. There would be time enough to say sorry tomorrow. Sorry for dragging him home early . . . sorry for saying Lavenham Interiors could go down the drain for all she cared . . . sorry for getting everything so wrong . . . sorry for blaming the English for the sins of the Irish . . .

Grief squeezed her heart every time she thought about Rosheen. But it was a complicated grief that carried shame and guilt in equal proportions, because she couldn't rid herself of responsibil-

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ity for what the girl had done. "I thought she was keen on Kevin," she told the inspector that afternoon. "Ian never understood the attraction, but I did."

"Why?" he asked with a hint of cynicism. "Because it was a suitable match? Because Kevin was the same class as she was?"

"It wasn't a question of class," she protested.

"Wasn't it? In some ways you're more of a snob than the English, Mrs. Lavenham. You forced Rosheen to acknowledge her relationship with Liam and Bridey because *you* acknowledged them," he told her brutally, "but it really ought to have occurred to you that a bright girl like her would have higher ambitions than to be known as the niece of Irish gypsies."

"Then why bother with Kevin at all? Wasn't he just as bad?"

The inspector shrugged. "What choice did she have? How many unattached men are there in Sowerbridge? And you had to believe she was with someone, Mrs. Lavenham, otherwise you'd have started asking awkward questions. Still—" he paused—"I doubt the poor lad had any idea just how much she loathed him."

"No one did," said Siobhan sadly. "Everyone thought she was besotted with him after the incident in the barn."

"She was playing a long game," he said slowly, "and she was very good at it. You never doubted she was fond of her aunt and uncle."

"I believed what she told me."

He smiled slightly. "And you were determined that everyone else should believe it as well."

Siobhan looked at him with stricken eyes. "Oh God! Does that make it my fault?"

"No," he murmured. "Mine. I didn't take you seriously when you said the Irish only really enjoy fighting each other."

Thursday, 11th March, 1999—3: 00 P.M.

Cynthia Haversley opened her front door a crack. "Oh, it's you," she said with surprising warmth. "I thought it was another of those beastly journalists."

Well, well! How quickly times change, thought Siobhan ruefully as she stepped inside. Not so long ago Cynthia had been inviting those same "beastly" journalists into Malvern House for cups of tea while she regaled them with stories about the O'Riordans' iniquities. She nodded to Peter, who was standing in the doorway to the drawing room. "How are you both?"

It was three days since she had seen them, and she was surprised by how much they had aged. Peter, in particular, looked haggard and grey, and she assumed he must have been hitting the bottle harder than usual. He made a rocking motion with his

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hand. "Not too good. Rather ashamed about the way we've all been behaving, if I'm honest."

Cynthia opened her mouth to say something, but clearly thought better of it. "Where are the boys?" she asked instead.

"Nora's looking after them for me."

"You should have brought them with you. I wouldn't have minded."

Siobhan shook her head. "I didn't want them to hear what I'm going to say to you, Cynthia."

The woman bridled immediately. "You can't blame—"

"Enough!" snapped Peter, cutting her short and stepping to one side. "Come into the drawing room, Siobhan. How's Ian bearing up? We saw he'd come home."

She walked across to the window from where she could see the remains of Kilkenny Cottage. "Tired," she answered. "He didn't get back till early this morning and he had to leave again at crack of dawn for the office. We've got three contracts on the go and they're all going pear-shaped because neither of us has been there."

"It can't be easy for you."

"No," she said slowly, "it's not. Ian was supposed to stay in Italy till Friday, but as things are . . ." She paused. "Neither of us can be in two places at once, unfortunately." She turned to look at them. "And I can't leave the children."

"I'm sorry," said Peter.

She gave a small laugh. "There's no need to be. I do rather like them, you know, so it's no hardship having to stay at home. I just wish it hadn't had to happen this way." She folded her arms and studied Cynthia curiously. "James told me an interesting story yesterday," she said. "I assume it's true, because he's a truthful child, but I thought I'd check it with you anyway. In view of everything that's happened, I'm hesitant to accept anyone's word on anything. Did you go down to the farm one day and find James and Oliver alone?"

"I saw Rosheen leave," she said, "but I knew no one was there to look after them because I'd been—well—watching the drive that morning." She puffed out her chest in self-defence. "I told you she was deceitful and lazy but you wouldn't listen to me."

"Because you never told me why," said Siobhan mildly.

"I assumed you knew and that it didn't bother you. Ian made no secret of how angry he was when you came home one night and found her with Kevin in the barn, but you just said he was overreacting." She considered the wisdom of straight-speaking, decided it was necessary, and took a deep breath. "If I'm honest, Siobhan, you even seemed to find it rather amusing. I never understood why. Personally, I'd have sacked her on the spot and looked for

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someone more respectable."

Siobhan shook her head. "I thought it was a one-off. I didn't realise she'd been making a habit of it."

"She was too interested in sex not to, my dear. I've never seen anyone so shameless. More often than not, she'd leave your boys with Bridey if it meant she could have a couple of hours with Kevin Wyllie. Many's the time I watched her sneak into Kilkenny Cottage only to sauce out again five minutes later without them. And then she'd drive off in your Range Rover, bold as brass, with that unpleasant young man beside her. I did wonder if you knew what your car was being used for."

"You should have told me."

Cynthia shook her head. "You wouldn't have listened."

"In fact, Cynthia tried several times to broach the subject," said Peter gently, "but on each occasion you shot her down in flames and all but accused her of being an anti-Irish bigot."

"I never had much choice," murmured Siobhan without hostility. "Could you not have divorced Rosheen from Liam, Bridey, and Patrick, Cynthia? Why did every conversation about my nanny have to begin with a diatribe against her relatives?"

There was a short, uncomfortable silence.

Siobhan sighed. "What I really don't understand is why you should have thought I was the kind of mother who wouldn't care if her children were being neglected?"

Cynthia looked embarrassed. "I didn't, not really. I just thought you were—well, rather more relaxed than most."

"Because I'm Irish and not English?"

Peter tut-tutted in concern. "It wasn't like that," he said. "Hang it all, Siobhan, we didn't know what Rosheen's instructions were. To be honest, we thought you were encouraging her to make use of Bridey in order to give the poor old thing a sense of purpose. We didn't applaud your strategy—as a matter of fact, it seemed like a mad idea to us—" He broke off with a guilty expression. "As Cynthia kept saying, there's no way she'd have left two boisterous children in the care of a disabled woman and a drunken man, but we thought you were trying to demonstrate solidarity with them. If I trust the O'Riordans with my children, then so should the rest of you . . . that sort of thing."

Siobhan turned back to the window and the blackened heap that had been Kilkenny Cottage. *For want of a nail the shoe was lost . . . for want of a shoe the horse was lost . . . for want of mutual understanding lives were lost* . . . "Couldn't you have told me about the time you went to the farm and found James and Oliver on their own?" she murmured, her breath misting the glass.

"I did," said Cynthia.

"When?"

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"The day after I found them. I stopped you and Ian at the end of the drive as you were setting off for work and told you your children were too young to be left alone. I must say I thought your attitude was extraordinarily casual but—well—" she shrugged—"I'd rather come to expect that."

Siobhan remembered the incident well. Cynthia had stood in the drive, barring their way, and had then thrust her indignant red face through Ian's open window and lectured them on the foolishness of employing a girl with loose morals. "We both assumed you were talking about the night she took Kevin into the barn. Ian said afterwards that he wished he'd never mentioned it, because you were using it as a stick to beat us."

Cynthia frowned. "Didn't James and Oliver tell you about it? I sat with them for nearly two hours, in all conscience, and gave Rosheen a piece of my mind when she finally came back."

"They were too frightened. Kevin beat them about the head because they'd opened the door to you and said if I ever asked them if Mrs. Haversley had come to the house they were to say no."

Cynthia lowered herself carefully onto a chair. "I had no idea," she said in an appalled tone of voice. "No wonder you took it so calmly."

"Mm." Siobhan glanced from the seated woman to her husband. "We seem to have got our wires crossed all along the line, and I feel very badly about it now. I keep thinking that if I hadn't been so quick to condemn you all, *no one* would have died."

Peter shook his head. "We all feel the same way. Even Sam and Nora Bentley. They're saying that if they'd backed your judgment of Liam and Bridey instead of sitting on the fence—" He broke off on a sigh. "I can't understand why we allowed it to get so out of hand. We're not unkind people. A little misguided . . . rather too easily prejudiced perhaps . . . but not *unkind.*"

Siobhan thought of Jeremy Jardine. Was Peter including Lavinia's grandson in this general absolution, she wondered.

7.

09:00 A.M.—Friday, 12th March, 1999

"Can I get you a cup of tea, Bridey?" asked the inspector as he came into the interview room.

The old woman's eyes twinkled mischievously. "I'd rather have a Guinness."

He laughed as he pulled out a chair. "You and Liam both. He says it's the first time he's been on the wagon since his last stretch in prison nearly twenty years ago." He studied her for a moment. "Any regrets?"

"Only the one," she said. "That we didn't kill Mr. Jardine as well."

"No regrets about killing Rosheen?"

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"Why would I have?" she asked him. "I'd crush a snake as easily. She taunted us with how clever she'd been to kill two harmless old ladies and then have my poor Patrick take the blame. And all for the sake of marrying a rich man. I should have recognised her as the devil the first day I saw her."

"How did you kill her?"

"She was a foolish girl. She thought that because I'm in a wheelchair she had nothing to fear from me, when, of course, every bit of strength I have is in my arms. It was Liam she was afraid of, but she should have remembered that Liam hasn't been able to hurt a fly these fifteen years." She smiled as she released the arm of her wheelchair and held it up. The two metal prongs that located it in the chair's framework protruded from each end. "I can only shift myself to a bed or a chair when this is removed, and it's been lifted out that many times the ends are like razors. Perhaps I'd not have brought it down on her wicked head if she hadn't laughed and called us illiterate Irish bastards. Then again, perhaps I would. To be sure, I was angry enough."

"Why weren't you angry with Kevin?" he asked curiously. "He says he was only there that night because he'd been paid to set fire to your house. Why didn't you kill him, too? He's making no bones about the fact that he and his friends have been terrorising you for months."

"Do you think we didn't know that? Why would we go back to Kilkenny Cottage in secret if it wasn't to catch him and his friends red-handed and make you coppers sit up and take notice of the fearful things they've been doing to us these many months? As Liam said, fight fire with fire. Mind, that's not to say we wanted to kill them—give them a shock, maybe."

"But only Kevin turned up?"

She nodded. "Poor greedy creature that he is. Would he share good money with his friends when a single match would do the business? He came creeping in with his petrol can and I've never seen a lad so frightened as when Liam slipped the noose about his throat and called to me to switch on the light. We'd strung it from the beams and the lad was caught like a fly on a web. Did we tell you he wet himself?"

"No."

"Well, he did. Pissed all over the floor in terror."

"He's got an inch-wide rope burn round his neck, Bridey. Liam must have pulled the noose pretty tight for that, so perhaps Kevin thought you were going to hang him?"

"Liam hasn't the strength to pull anything tight," she said matter-of-factly, slotting the chair arm back into its frame. "Not these fifteen years."

"So you keep saying," murmured the inspector.

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"I expect Kevin will tell you he slipped and did it himself. He was that frightened he could hardly keep his feet, but at least it meant we knew he was telling the truth. He could have named anybody . . . Mrs. Haversley . . . Mr. Jardine . . . but instead he told us it was our niece who had promised him a hundred quid if he'd burn Kilkenny Cottage down and get us out of her hair for good."

"Did he also say she had been orchestrating the campaign against you?"

"Oh, yes," she murmured, staring past him as her mind replayed the scene in her head. "'She calls you thieving Irish trash,' he said, 'and hates you for your cheap, common ways and your poverty. She wants rid of you from Sowerbridge because people will never treat her right until you're gone.'" She smiled slightly. "So I told him I didn't blame her, that it can't have been easy having her cousin arrested for murder and her aunt and uncle treated like lepers—" she paused to stare at her hands—"and he said Patrick's arrest had nothing to do with it."

"Did he explain what he meant?"

"That she hated us from the first day she met us." She shook her head. "Though, to be sure, I don't know what we did to make her think so badly of us."

"You lied to your family, Bridey. We've spoken to her brother. According to him, her mother filled her head with stories about how rich you and Liam were and how you'd sold your business in London to retire to a beautiful cottage in a beautiful part of England. I think the reality must have been a terrible disappointment to her. According to her brother, she came over from Ireland with dreams of meeting a wealthy man and marrying him."

"She was wicked through and through, Inspector, and I'll not take any of her fault on me. I was honest with her from the beginning. We are as you see us, I said, because God saw fit to punish us for Liam and Patrick's wrongdoing, but you'll never be embarrassed by it, because no one knows. We may not be as rich as you hoped, but we're loving, and there'll always be a home for you here if the job doesn't work out with Mrs. Lavenham."

"Now Mrs. Lavenham's blaming herself, Bridey. She says if she'd spent less time at the office and more time with Rosheen and the children, no one would have died."

Distress creased Bridey's forehead. "It's always the same when people abandon their religion. Without God in their lives, they quickly lose sight of the devil. Yet for you and me, Inspector, the devil exists in the hearts of the wicked. Mrs. Lavenham needs reminding that it was Rosheen who betrayed this family . . . and only Rosheen."

"Because you gave her the means when you told her about Patrick's conviction."

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The old woman's mouth thinned into a narrow line. "And she used it against him. Can you believe that I never once questioned why those poor old ladies were killed with Patrick's hammer? Would you not think—knowing my boy was innocent—that I'd have put two and two together and said, there's no such thing as coincidence?"

"She was clever," said the inspector. "She made everyone believe she was only interested in Kevin Wyllie, and Kevin Wyllie had no reason on earth to murder Mrs. Fanshaw."

"I have it in my heart to feel sorry for the poor lad now," said Bridey with a small laugh, "never mind he terrorised us for months. Rosheen showed her colours soon enough when she came down after Liam's phone call to find Kevin trussed up like a chicken on the floor. That's when I saw the cunning in her eyes and realised for the first time what a schemer she was. She tried to pretend Kevin was lying, but when she saw we didn't believe her, she snatched the petrol can from the table. 'I'll make you burn in hell, you stupid, incompetent bastard,' she told him. 'You've served your purpose, made everyone think I was interested in you when you're so far beneath me I wouldn't have wasted a second glance on you if I hadn't had to.' Then she came towards me, unscrewing the lid of the petrol can as she did so and slopping it over my skirt. Bold as brass she was with her lighter in her hand, telling Liam she'd set fire to me if he tried to stop her phoning her fancy man to come and help her." Her eyes hardened at the memory. "She couldn't keep quiet, of course. Perhaps people can't when they believe in their own cleverness. She told us how gullible we were . . . what excitement she'd had battering two old ladies to death . . . how besotted Mr. Jardine was with her . . . how easy it had been to cast suspicion on a moron like Patrick . . . And when Mr. Jardine never answered because he was hiding in his cellar, she turned on me in a fury and thrust the lighter against my skirt, saying she'd burn us all anyway. Kevin will get the blame, she said, even though he'll be dead. Half the village knows he's been sent down here to do the business."

"And that's when you hit her?"

Bridey nodded. "I certainly wasn't going to wait for the flame to ignite."

"And Kevin witnessed all this?"

"He did indeed, and will say so at my trial if you decide to prosecute me."

The inspector smiled slightly. "So who set the house on fire, Bridey?"

"To be sure, it was Rosheen who did it. The petrol spilled all over the floor as she fell and the flint struck as her hand hit the quarry tiles." A flicker of amusement crossed her old face as she looked at him. "Ask young Kevin if you don't believe me."

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"I already have. He agrees with you. The only trouble is, he breaks out in a muck sweat every time the question's put to him."

"And why wouldn't he? It was a terrible experience for all of us."

"So why didn't you go up in flames, Bridey? You said your skirt was saturated with petrol."

"Ah, well, do you not think that was God's doing?" She crossed herself. "Of course, it may have had something to do with the fact that Kevin had managed to free himself and was able to push me to the door while Liam smothered the flames with his coat, but for myself I count it a miracle."

"You're lying through your teeth, Bridey. We think Liam started the fire on purpose in order to hide something."

The old woman gave a cackle of laughter. "Now why would you think that, Inspector? What could two poor cripples have done that they didn't want the police to know about?" Her eyes narrowed. "Never mind a witch had tried to rob them of their only son?"

02:00 P.M.—Friday, 12th March, 1999

"Did you find out?" Siobhan asked the inspector.

He shrugged. "We think Kevin had to watch a ritual burning and is too terrified to admit to it because he's the one who took the petrol there in the first place." He watched a look of disbelief cross Siobhan's face. "Bridey called her a witch," he reminded her.

Siobhan shook her head. "And you think that's the evidence Liam wanted to destroy?"

"Yes."

She gave an unexpected laugh. "You must think the Irish are very backward, Inspector. Didn't ritual burnings go out with the Middle Ages?" She paused, unable to control her amusement. "Are you going to charge them with it? The press will love it if you do. I can just imagine the headlines when the case comes to trial."

"No," he said, watching her. "Kevin's sticking to the story Liam and Bridey taught him, and the pathologist's suggestion that Rosheen was upright when she died looks too damn flakey to take into court. At the moment, we're accepting a plea of self-defence and accidental arson." He paused. "Unless you know differently, Mrs. Lavenham."

Her expression was unreadable. "All I know," she told him, "is that Bridey could no more have burnt her niece as a witch than she could get up out of her wheelchair and walk. But don't go by what I say, Inspector. I've been wrong about everything else."

"Mm. Well, you're right. Their defence against murder rests entirely on their disabilities."

Siobhan seemed to lose interest and fell into a thoughtful silence which the inspector was loath to break. "Was it Rosheen who told you Patrick had stolen Lavinia's jewellery?" she demanded abruptly.

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"Why do you ask?"

"Because I've never understood why you suddenly concentrated all your efforts on him."

"We found his fingerprints at the manor."

"Along with mine and most of Sowerbridge's."

"But yours aren't on file, Mrs. Lavenham, and you don't have a criminal record."

"Neither should Patrick, Inspector, not if it's fifteen years since he committed a crime. The English have a strong sense of justice, and that means his slate would have been wiped clean after seven years. Someone—" she studied him curiously—"must have pointed the finger at him. I've never been able to work out who it was, but perhaps it was you? Did you base your whole case against him on privileged knowledge that you acquired fifteen years ago in London? If so, you're a shit."

He was irritated enough to defend himself. "He boasted to Rosheen about how he'd got the better of a senile old woman and showed her Mrs. Fanshaw's jewellery to prove it. She said he was full of himself, talked about how both old women were so ga-ga they'd given him the run of the house in return for doing some small maintenance jobs. She didn't say Patrick had murdered them—she was too clever for that—but when we questioned Patrick and he denied ever being in the manor house or knowing anything about any stolen jewellery, we decided to search Kilkenny Cottage and came up trumps."

"Which is what Rosheen wanted."

"We know that now, Mrs. Lavenham, and if Patrick had been straight with us from the beginning, it might have been different then. But unfortunately, he wasn't. His difficulty was he had the old lady's rings in his possession as well as the costume jewellery that Miss Jenkins gave him. He knew perfectly well he'd been palmed off with worthless glass, so he hopped upstairs when Miss Jenkins's back was turned and helped himself to something more valuable. He claims Mrs. Fanshaw was asleep so he just slipped the rings off her fingers and tiptoed out again."

"Did Bridey and Rosheen know he'd taken the rings?"

"Yes, but he told them they were glass replicas which had been in the box with the rest of the bits and pieces. Rosheen knew differently, of course—she and Jardine understood Patrick's psychology well enough to know he'd steal something valuable the minute his earnings were denied—but Bridey believed him."

She nodded. "Has Jeremy admitted his part in it?"

"Not yet," murmured the inspector dryly, "but he will. He's a man without scruples. He recognised a fellow traveller in Rosheen, seduced her with promises of marriage, then persuaded her to kill his grandmother and her nurse so that he could inherit.

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Rosheen didn't need an alibi—she was never even questioned about where she was that night because you all assumed she was with Kevin."

"On the principle that shagging Kevin was the only thing that interested her," agreed Siobhan. "She *was* clever, you know. No one suspected for a minute that she was having an affair with Jeremy. Cynthia Haversley thought she was a common little tart. Ian thought Kevin was taking advantage of her. *I* thought she was having a good time."

"She was. She had her future mapped out as Lady of the Manor once Patrick was convicted and Jardine inherited the damn place. Apparently, her one ambition in life was to lord it over Liam and Bridey. If you're interested, Mrs. Haversley is surprisingly sympathetic towards her." He lifted a cynical eyebrow. "She says she recognises how easy it must have been for a degenerate like Jardine to manipulate an unsophisticated country girl when he had no trouble persuading *sophisticated*—" he drew quote marks in the air—"types like her and Mr. Haversley to believe whatever he told them."

Siobhan smiled. "I'm growing quite fond of her in a funny sort of way. It's like fighting your way through a blackened baked potato. The outside's revolting but the inside's delicious and rather soft." Her eyes strayed towards the window, searching for some distant horizon. "The odd thing is, Nora Bentley told me on Monday that it was a pity I'd never seen the kind side of Cynthia . . . and I had the bloody nerve to say I didn't want to. God, how I wish—" She broke off abruptly, unwilling to reveal too much of the anguish that still churned inside her. "Why did Liam and Bridey take Kevin with them?" she asked next.

"According to him, they all panicked. *He* was scared he'd get the blame for burning the house down with Rosheen in it if he stayed behind, and *they* were scared the police would think they'd done it on purpose to prejudice Patrick's trial. He claims he left them when they got to Liverpool because he has a friend up there he hadn't seen for ages."

"And according to you?"

"We don't think he had any choice. We think Liam dragged him by the noose round his neck and only released him when they were sure he'd stick by the story they'd concocted."

"Why were Liam and Bridey going to Ireland?"

"According to them, or according to us?"

"According to them."

"Because they were frightened . . . because they knew it would take time for the truth to come out . . . because they had nowhere else to go . . . because everything they owned had been destroyed . . . because Ireland was home . . ."

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"And according to you?"

"They guessed Kevin would start to talk as soon as he got over his fright, so they decided to run."

She gave a low laugh. "You can't have it both ways, Inspector. If they released him because they were sure he'd stick by the story, then they didn't need to run. And if they knew they could never be sure of him—as they most certainly should have done if they'd performed a ritual murder—he would have died with Rosheen."

"Then what are they trying to hide?"

She was amazed he couldn't see it. "Probably nothing," she hedged. "You're just in the habit of never believing anything they say."

He gave a stubborn shake of his head. "No, there *is* something. I've known them too long not to know when they're lying."

He would go on until he found out, she thought. He was that kind of man. And when he did, his suspicion about Rosheen's death would immediately raise its ugly head again. Unless . . . "The trouble with the O'Riordans," she said, "is that they can never see the wood for the trees. Patrick's just spent nine months on remand because he was more afraid of being charged with what he *had* done . . . theft . . . than what he *hadn't* done . . . murder. I suspect Liam and Bridey are doing the same—desperately trying to hide the crime they have committed, without realising they're digging an even bigger hole for themselves on the one they haven't."

"Go on."

Siobhan's eyes twinkled as mischievously as Bridey's had done. "Off the record?" she asked him. "I won't say another word otherwise."

"Can they be charged with it?"

"Oh, yes, but I doubt it'll trouble your conscience much if you don't report it."

He was too curious not to give her the go-ahead. "Off the record," he agreed.

"All right, I think it goes something like this. Liam and Bridey have been living off the English taxpayer for fifteen years. They get disability benefit for his paralysed arm, disability benefit for her broken pelvis, and Patrick gets a care allowance for looking after both of them. They get mobility allowances, heating allowances, and rate rebates." She tipped her forefinger at him. "But Kevin's built like a gorilla and prides himself on his physique, and Rosheen was as tall as I am. So how did a couple of elderly cripples manage to overpower both of them?"

"You tell me."

"At a guess, Liam wielded his useless arm to hold them in a bear hug while Bridey leapt up out of her chair to tie them up. Bridey would call it a miracle cure. Social Services would call it

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deliberate fraud. It depends how easily you think English doctors can be fooled by professional malingerers."

He was visibly shocked. "Are you saying Patrick never disabled either of them?"

Her rich laughter peeled round the room. "He must have done at the time. You can't fake a shattered wrist and a broken pelvis, but I'm guessing Liam and Bridey probably prolonged their own agony in order to milk sympathy and money out of the system." She canted her head to one side. "Don't you find it interesting that they decided to move away from the doctors who'd been treating them in London to hide themselves in the wilds of Hampshire where the only person competent to sign their benefit forms is—er—medically speaking—well, past his sell-by date? You've met Sam Bentley. Do you seriously think it would ever occur to him to question whether two people who'd been registered disabled by a leading London hospital were ripping off the English taxpayer?"

"Jesus!" He shook his head. "But why did they need to burn the house down? What would we have found that was so incriminating? Apart from Rosheen's body, of course."

"Sets of fingerprints from Liam's right hand all over the door knobs?" Siobhan suggested. "The marks of Bridey's shoes on the kitchen floor? However Rosheen died—whether in self-defence or not—they couldn't afford to report it because you'd have sealed off Kilkenny Cottage immediately while you tried to work out what happened."

The inspector looked interested. "And it wouldn't have taken us long to realise that neither of them is as disabled as they claim to be."

"No."

"And we'd have arrested them immediately on suspicion of murder."

She nodded. "Just as you did Patrick."

He acknowledged the point with a grudging smile. "Do you know all this for a fact, Mrs. Lavenham?"

"No," she replied. "Just guessing. And I'm certainly not going to repeat it in court. It's irrelevant anyway. The evidence went up in flames."

"Not if I get a doctor to certify they're as agile as I am."

"That doesn't prove they were agile before the fire," she pointed out. "Bridey will find a specialist to quote psychosomatic paralysis at you, and Sam Bentley's never going to admit to being fooled by a couple of malingerers." She chuckled. "Neither will Cynthia Haversley, if it comes to that. She's been watching them out of her window for years, and she's never suspected a thing. In any case, Bridey's a great believer in miracles, and she's already told you it was God who rescued them from the inferno."

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"She must think I'm an absolute idiot."

"Not you personally. Just your . . . er . . . kind."

He frowned ominously. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Siobhan studied him with amusement. "The Irish have been getting the better of the English for centuries, Inspector." She watched his eyes narrow in instinctive denial. "And if the English weren't so blinded by their own self-importance," she finished mischievously, "they might have noticed." ●

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: In the seven years since she first appeared on the mystery scene with her novel *The Ice House,* Minette Walters has been the recipient of three of the field's most prestigious awards: the Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America, Britain's Crime Writers Association Gold Dagger, and the John Creasy Award. Ms. Walters has been compared to Agatha Christie, P.D. James, and Ruth Rendell. With her books now translated into thrity-two languages, she is already one of the world's most popular authors, and her work is also known to millions of TV viewers in the U.S. and the U.K., for five of her novels have already aired as TV movies and the sixth is currently in production. The short story appears to be the only area of crime fiction in which Ms. Walters has not already made her mark: "The Tinder Box" is her first published short fiction and *EQMM* is immensely pleased to have had the first U.S. publication of it.

ATTENTION READERS!

In the September/October 1999 *EQMM,* we had the privilege of presenting two stories that employed the characters Ellery Queen, Richard Queen, and Sergeant Velie—all characters created by Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee in the novels, short stories, and radio plays they penned under the pseudonym Ellery Queen. Edward D. Hoch's "The Circle of Ink" and Jon L. Breen's "The Gilbert and Sullivan Clue," in the 9/10 issue, are the first new works of fiction to make use of the Ellery Queen characters since 1971, and it was with the generous permission of the Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee Literary Property Trusts that Mr. Hoch and Mr. Breen undertook to write these fine pastiches.

Both the Hoch and the Breen story correctly carried an author copyright notice, but each story should also have carried the following notice regarding the copyright of the Ellery Queen characters:

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SKIN CARE UPDATE

The "hidden" problem that forces millions of women to wear pants... and the natural solution!

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by Melinda Walthington

It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like groups of veins radiating out from a central area, they can look like fine lines or appear in "starburst" clusters. Although men are not immune to spider veins, they are overwhelmingly a female problem. Unlike large, bulging varicose veins that can cause pain and even lead to serious health problems, spider veins are primarily a cosmetic problem.

Not even proper diet and exercise are guaranteed to prevent unsightly spider veins. They tend to be hereditary, and worsen as we age. Aside from changing the way you dress, using concealing makeup or resorting to expensive treatments, there has been little you could do to get rid of spider veins—until now!

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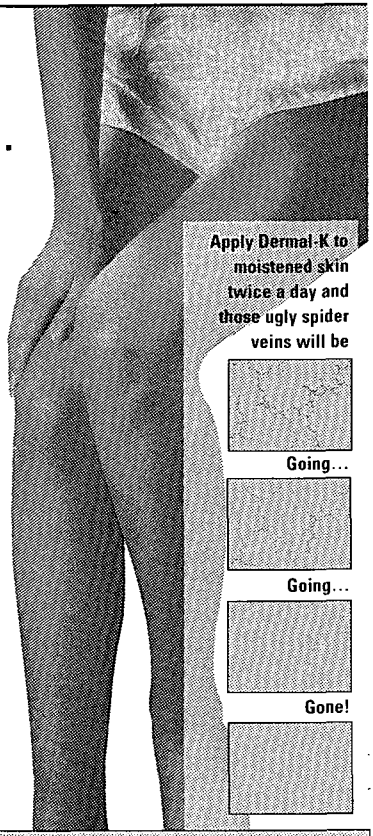

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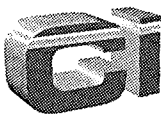

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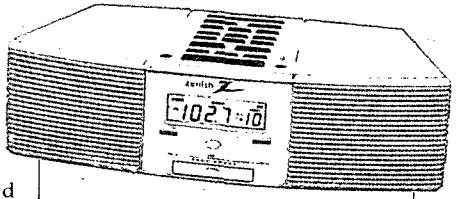

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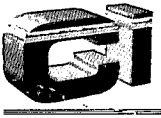

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